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The LONELY 淋しがりや のエゴイスト Egotist

June

Yaoi



Novel

VISIT...

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Caliente.COM



"Nngh—don't touch me!"

As I struggled, the robe slipped from my shoulder, making me look even more depraved.

THE LONELY EGOTIST 淋しがりやのエゴイスト

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The other day, I almost fell into a puddle while I was walking the dog and I screamed "Waugh!" A few seconds later, I was angry at myself for screaming "Waugh!" instead of something cute like "Eek!" Luckily, no one saw me.



THE LONELY EGOTIST

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The Lonely Egotist

Chapter One

I walked out of the station, a grainy, faxed map in hand.

Five minutes' walk from the eastern exit—it was nearby. I walked slowly from the station, scanning the chaos of buildings anxiously.

I had been living in Tokyo for five years, but I still wasn't used to streets like this. Watching the crowds of people stride past me dispassionately made me uncomfortable. It was like being surrounded by sophisticated robots.

In the country, when you pass people on the street, there's still some life in their faces, even if they're expressionless.

"It should be around here...Maybe this?"

I stood outside a white four-story building that looked, at first glance, completely unremarkable. If it hadn't been for the plaque next to the entrance that read "Hotel Moon", I never would have noticed it.

I thought maybe it was a business hotel, but then I caught sight of a strangely detailed list of prices, offering stays of various lengths. I tilted my head at it.

Rest – 5000 yen/three hours...

Overnight – 8000 yen...

Happy Hour A – 6 A.M. to 5 P.M.,

Happy Hour B – 2 P.M. to 8 P.M.

What did all this mean?

One possibility came to mind. A normal hotel wouldn't have such a detailed list of charges.

"I'd better go in, anyway. Y-yeah," I said aloud to myself, summoning my blank mind back on track.

I stepped hesitantly through the sliding automatic doors and entered a perfectly normal-looking lobby. A middle-aged woman and young man were behind the front desk.

"Welcome to Hotel Moon," they called out cheerfully.

I shook my head bashfully. "I—I'm not a customer, I'm here about a job."

I'd been working for more than a year, but I managed to force out an introduction that was even worse than a high school student's. The young man nodded warmly at me without the slightest sign of suspicion.

"Are you the man from Tomato Design? We've been expecting you. Please come with me."

He stepped out from behind the desk as he spoke and bent politely in a bow. I hurried to return the gesture. I thought I recognized his voice as the person I'd spoken with on the phone to arrange this meeting.

"Thank you." The man was dressed in a perfectly professional suit, but he looked very young.

His childlike face made it easy to believe that he was a student, but his formal speech and mannered reserve made it obvious that he had office experience. There was no telling how old he was.

We passed the elevator and what looked like a

kitchen and walked down a long, white-walled hallway. He knocked on the door at the very end. He pounded his fist twice, then turned the doorknob without receiving a response.

The door wasn't locked, and it swung open easily.

"Sir, the man from Tomato Design is here."

"Kay." A low voice answered the man's cheerful proclamation.

I had forgotten my anxiety, but imagining the man I was about to meet, who had commissioned this project, it reawakened at full force.

"Please, go in. I'll bring some tea." The man ushered me in through the open door.

"I'm sorry to disturb you. My name is Kasuga, from Tomato Design."

I introduced myself from the doorway then, head lowered, entered the room. The door clapped shut behind me.

The room was much larger than I'd expected given the narrow hallway outside. Just inside the door were two comfortable-looking sofas, arranged on either side of a table. A staircase led up to a small floor somewhat like a loft above. The only other things I saw were the frosted glass wall of a bathroom and a huge wall-mounted television.

It reminded me of an electronics commercial. It might have been a little crass to think about the price, but it looked like something that easily could have cost seven hundred thousand yen.

I couldn't see the owner.

Flustered at being unable to locate the man who had spoken, my eyes swept the room nervously. Suddenly, I heard a deep, languid voice as a tall man descended from the second story.

"I'm Asakura. Sorry to keep you waiting."

Nearly half the buttons of his white shirt were undone, flashing the bare skin of his chest. His shirt wasn't tucked in, either. He looked like he'd been asleep—but that was impossible.

"Have a seat."

Asakura's bangs were long enough to fall across his eyes and he brushed them aside as he pointed to one of the sofas. He stepped off the staircase and stood before me. He was several inches taller than me—though I wasn't exactly short—and our gazes locked. I'm usually taller than most of the people I meet, so it was odd to find myself looking up at someone. I'm embarrassed to say that I stared at the man quite intensely.

His sloped, narrow eyes were sharp and beautiful. His face was like an exquisite mask. It was the first time I'd seen someone who so merited the description of handsome.

Common sense told me that he looked like a slob, but I still found him oddly appealing. It was the first time in my life that I'd found another man sexy and it made me nervous.

He looked like he was sizing me up, too, and never looked away.

"Um, I'm Minami Kasuga, from Tomato Design. Thank you for agreeing to see me today."

I repeated the self-introduction I had given upon

entering the room. If I didn't say something, I knew I would only blush pathetically.

"Shinya Asakura. I own the Moon Hotel chain. But please," he said, indicating the sofa once again. We sat down across from each other. I searched in my breast pocket and pulled out a business card.

"I'd like to thank you for choosing us for your project. I've been put in charge, as the chief of interior design."

I held my card out with both hands and the man took it in his long fingers with a word of thanks. I had marveled at how long his arms and legs were, and his fingers were no different.

"Now where did I put my cards?" Asakura mumbled to himself absent-mindedly as he searched his shirt and pants pockets, dumping their contents on the table between us.

I recognized a handkerchief, cigarettes, and a lighter come out of his pants pocket. There was also a little piece of paper printed with a pink and blue design that looked exactly like a candy wrapper.

It was a type of creamy candy I'd enjoyed eating as a child. Why did he have that in his pocket? I don't mean to insult anyone's tastes, but I just couldn't picture this man sitting in front of me eating this sweet, creamy candy. I stared at the wrapper, at a loss.

As Asakura continued rummaging, there was a knock at the door.

"Here's your tea, gentlemen."

The young man who'd escorted me in earlier came back, sounding cheerful. As he set mugs and a plateful of

cookies on the table, Asakura whispered to him.

"Do you know where my business cards are, Yuta?"

"I have them."

The young man named Yuta took a leather card case out of his jacket pocket. Asakura took it from him, then handed one to me. "Sorry about all that confusion."

"Um, thank you."

The card he gave me featured the gold-printed logo of the Moon Hotel chain and Asakura's name and title. He was the company president.

He looked so young that it was hard to believe he was really in charge. He didn't look quite thirty-five yet.

"This is Yuta Fujikawa, my assistant of sorts."

The young man who stood beside the table paid no attention to this strange introduction. He smiled brightly at me and bowed his head.

"Excuse me for saying so, Mister Kasuga, but I'm a little surprised. You're younger than I expected."

Asakura said the exact thing that I had been thinking about him. Apparently the feeling was mutual.

Of course I didn't say that. I responded coolly.

"Does it make you nervous to trust this project to someone young? I want to reassure you that I'll take responsibility for the work you've commissioned and perform to the best of my ability."

"Oh, no, I didn't mean that. I saw one of your projects on the web. It had such a retro feel to it, I just assumed someone older must have done it. It was just a

little unexpected."

Asakura smoothly brushed off fiery pledge. He struck me as aloof, the very opposite of my own personality, which was quick to react.

"When I was growing up, my family managed a traditional inn. I'm sorry to say that age alone does not make something classy, but there were many old houses in the neighborhood, so I've been very familiar with more traditional styles since I was a child."

"How interesting. You must have found something very appealing about it to produce such a fond interpretation."

Asakura nodded deeply, a small smile appearing on his lips. With the expression, a touch of humanity came across the handsome features of his mask-like face. It was terribly charming.

Considering that I was reacting as another man, I imagined that a woman would be swept completely off her feet by such a slight smile.

What was this power? It must have been pheromones. Whether it was conscious or not, the man reeked of eroticism.

Of course, Asakura had no idea what I was thinking. He continued speaking slowly. "I currently own two hotels besides this one, and we're building a fourth. I was racking my brains trying to find a good interior designer. I was at the end of my rope when I found the photos of your work online. It seemed somehow tender, almost warm. I fell in love with your work as soon as I saw it. The sky's the limit for this project and I would love to be able to work with you, Mister Kasuga."

This was the first time anyone had ever spoken to me this way. I felt myself growing excited, my heart pounding in my chest. I started to nod my acceptance, then started and looked up. I had to make sure of one thing first.

"May I ask you something? Um, this isn't a regular hotel, is it? And neither is the one you're building now, am I right?" I asked, flustered.

Asakura didn't react fast enough. Fujikawa, who stood beside him, answered first.

"Sir! You didn't tell them him what the job was for when you called?"

Asakura scratched the back of his head at Fujikawa's question, his eyes unfocused. "You know—I'm not sure."

"You don't know? You mean you didn't do it! I thought you'd already explained, so I didn't say anything! Poor Mister Kasuga looks so confused!"

He was right. I didn't remember hearing a single thing about what type of hotel this was going to be. I could say it was my fault for not doing the preliminary research, but it hadn't even occurred to me. I'd had no idea hotels like this existed.

"I'm sorry, I should have explained earlier. I own a chain of short-stay hotels, what some refer to as love hotels."

"Ah—uh...love hotels?" I had suspected as much as soon as I stood outside the building, but somehow hearing it stated so directly made it seem less exciting. No doubt that was because of the dignified way Asakura said it, without a trace of shame.



"Of course lovers can express their feelings for each other here, but we also offer rooms to office workers who are stranded in town after the last subway leaves. I've tried to avoid having a sleazy atmosphere at this hotel," Asakura explained in a low, measured voice. I nodded dutifully, without a word. I didn't look down on love hotels. My only concern was whether I was qualified for this project.

"Well, you see..." Just as I was about to broach the subject of my anxiety in accepting the project, a cell phone rang loudly.

"I'm sorry! Excuse me a minute."

Fujikawa left the room, rummaging in his pocket.

I felt strangely nervous being left alone with Asakura. Maybe it was just because he looked so unusual, but as soon as the thought occurred to me, I knew it was more than that. The co-owner of the design office I worked for, named Amamiya, was also unusually good-looking, and I worked beside him every day without problem. But Asakura was in a whole other ballpark.

Amamiya was like a piece of fine art, meant to be appreciated from afar, and despite the strange comparison, Asakura was also like a carnivorous plant. He seemed to attract prey with his pretty appearance and delectable fragrance, then devour the victims who stumbled into his grip.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

I was lost in my own thoughts. Asakura seemed restless and he pointed at the crumpled pack of cigarettes on the table.

"Oh, no. Go ahead."

I didn't smoke myself, but I wasn't going to stop anyone else from doing it. Really, I was impressed by how considerate he was for asking me, since I was sitting so close.

Asakura pulled a cigarette from the battered pack and held it between his lips. He lit it with a silver lighter and drew in a deep, satisfied breath. The man managed to look good even performing the most casual gestures. I felt suddenly embarrassed to be staring at Asakura's mouth and lowered my eyes to the tabletop.

"What were you about to say before?"

I looked up at Asakura's question and our eyes met through the smoke of his cigarette. As I opened my mouth to answer, the door opened and Fujikawa came back in.

"I'm sorry about that. Apparently there's some sort of problem at the Full Moon. Would you like me to go see what's going on?"

Fujikawa stood behind Asakura, speaking hesitantly. Since I was there, Asakura couldn't go himself.

Asakura looked up at Fujikawa and nodded. "Yes, thank you."

"I'll see what I can do, then. I'm sorry to interrupt your meeting, Mister Kasuga."

"If it's something major, call me," Asakura called as Fujikawa was leaving. He turned to me, picking up the threads of the conversation that had been left dangling.

"Sorry about all that. Now where were we?"

"Before I accept the project, I was wondering if I

could take a look at the hotel's rooms."

I took a furtive glance at Asakura's face. His expression never changed as he took his cigarette in two fingers and let out a resigned sigh. He took another drag from his cigarette with a meditative look on his face, then turned to one side to blow out the smoke.

"Am I to understand, Mister Kasuga, that you've never been...?"

"No, I haven't."

It wasn't that I lacked a true manly ego, but there wouldn't be any point in lying. Asakura stubbed his cigarette out in an ash tray before leaning back in the sofa and crossing his long legs.

"Well, I suppose there are some people who have their own apartments and don't need to worry about privacy."

"Yes, well...I suppose."

He was covering for me, but I didn't feel comfortable giving a boisterous laugh and shouting "You know it!" Instead, I stuttered my reply. Really, I just hadn't been in any situation that would make me need a place like this.

Silence filled the room.

"But you want to see the rooms. Of course, we don't want the exact same style, but they're roughly the same dimensions as the new rooms will be."

"Thank you."

Asakura's voice became cheerful, as if he was trying to dispel the awkward atmosphere that had developed. He stood up from the couch as he spoke and I jumped up from my seat to follow him.

"Do you mind if I take photos?"

The best thing was to see it with my own eyes and then work from memory, but there were limits on how much I could remember.

"Of course. Do whatever you need to." I pulled out my digital camera and followed Asakura as he walked around the room.

"Should I describe the amenities available? This is the bath unit. The door is made of glass, but there are blinds to block the view from the room. I don't have one in this room, but there are also entertainment centers with basic video games and karaoke. And for an additional fee there are adult movies. We want our guests to be free to enjoy themselves in any way they choose."

As I listened to Asakura's explanation, I snapped the occasional photo. This place was much more complex than I'd imagined. I'd always pictured love hotels as places someone would go just to have sex, but this one was outfitted like a high-class paradise.

"These stairs lead up to the bed. None of the other rooms are built this way, but since this is my private room, I wanted to put my bed out of sight."

"This is your room?" It struck me as deeply significant that Asakura lived in a love hotel.

The thought must have shown on my face. Asakura was looking me in the eye when he gave a rueful smile and folded his arms over his chest. He gave a slight laugh as he peered into my face.

"You're letting your imagination run wild now, aren't you? I just live here sometimes."

I was embarrassed to have my flight of imagination

revealed, but the fact that he lived here caught me by surprise. How could someone live in a place like this?

"This is my official address and everything. I stay at the other hotels from time to time, but I spend most of my time here. And this is the first one I built, so I'm a little attached to it."

"I—I see." I had no idea how to respond, so I only mumbled and nodded ambiguously.

What I learned from this was that Asakura was a strange man. He looked a little over thirty years old. He had long legs and a tall build, almost disgustingly handsome. He spoke with a deep voice that matched his age. His face wasn't very expressive, but sometimes a mischievous light twinkled in his eyes. He seemed fascinating, but I wasn't sure how I felt about working with him for months on end.

"It's a complete mess, but would you like to see upstairs? The bed area is pretty much the same as the other rooms." He pointed up the short staircase.

"Are you sure? If you don't mind."

Considering this was Asakura's room, the bedroom would be a very private place. I had pretty much given up on seeing it, since I couldn't ask to outright, but then he had offered to let me see it himself. Talk about luck.

I climbed up the stairs behind Asakura and found a space much larger than I'd expected. There was a bed more than twice as big as my own and a bar to hang clothes on one wall. There was also a computer desk. It felt like a combined office and bedroom. He was telling the truth about living here.

"Mister Kasuga?"

Asakura clapped me on the shoulder as I stared blankly around his room. He whispered my name low against my ear and I stiffened at the unexpected closeness.

"Um, yes?"

I stumbled unconsciously as I spoke. Why was his arm around my shoulders? I had the strangest sensation of being trapped in a spider's web.

"Since you came all the way up here, would you like to see how the bed feels?"

"What?!"

Before my brain had time to process what he had said, I felt Asakura pull my legs out from under me and I tumbled into the bed.

"Agh!"

I tried to catch myself, but he gave my shoulder a shove and there was nothing I could do to keep from tumbling onto the nearby mattress. The springs were strong and gently caught my falling body. The sheets were an unbroken pastel blue.

"What are you doing? Really, Mister Asakura, this is—"

I collected myself and twisted around out of the awkward position I had fallen into. I scrambled to sit up, but Asakura bore down on top of me, holding my wrists and pushing me back into the bed.

"Hey—A-Mister Asakura! What are you—? Mmph!"

Despite my timidity, Asakura stared down at me, a mysterious smile on his handsome face...as his lips drew closer.

I have to get out of here, I thought, but the situation was so completely unexpected that every muscle in my body had tensed and all I could do was twitch my fingers. He slowly rested his lips against my own and his moist tongue traced the gap between them. The vivid sensation brought the reality of the situation, grown fuzzily distant, crashing back on top of me.

"Miste—nngh! Mmph!"

I tried to shout Asakura's name, but that only let him slip his tongue between my open teeth. He dragged his tongue across the roof of my mouth, sending a convulsion down my spine. I could feel every hair on my body standing on edge.

"Please—mmph—"

I shook my head, trying to get away, but he held my head in his hands and consumed me with a deep, obliterating kiss. My mind was in complete chaos, not comprehending how something like this had happened to me.

"Nngh! Ah—"

I grabbed Asakura's shoulders, trying to push him off, but my arms were rapidly losing their strength and they fell back on the sheets.

This wasn't my first kiss. I had dated a girl when I was in school, and then I'd kissed someone as a dare at a party. I could count on one hand the number of times I'd done it, but I *had* done it. This was the first time, however, I had experienced something this intense, that burned my mind white and dragged me along without allowing the slightest resistance. Our tongues rolled over each other's, searching every part of my mouth.



There was a moment of too-deep contact as our mouths strained against each other's, and my limbs grew heavy.

"Ah—"

When Asakura finally released me, I gasped for a long-delayed breath.

"Your reaction is so innocent. Does that mean that not only have you never been to a love hotel, but you've never even done it?"

He flicked his tongue over his wet lips as he asked me this, smiling at me without any malice. I looked away in silence, but I couldn't stop the blood from rising into my cheeks. My face and ears burned all on their own. I was so ashamed of my reaction that I bit painfully into my lip.

"Yeah, I'm a virgin! Now please get off of me. What are you thinking?!"

I swung my arms and legs, trying to knock Asakura off of me, but he pressed me back down with his entire body. Asakura's face was relaxed sharp contrast to my desperation.

"How strange. You've never spent a night with a man, either?"

"Of—of course I haven't! Are you gay, Mister Asakura?!"

"I'm open-minded. If I'm interested, I don't make a big deal about gender. Don't you think it's sad to limit your options based on what gender someone is?"

Calling it open-minded made it sound nice, but what he was describing was just a lack of standards. Asakura made it sound strangely persuasive, which scared me. He probably had a revolving door on

his bedroom, open to men and women alike. I was convinced he had never been denied by the people he wanted to sleep with.

"M-maybe. But I'm not like that. Please, let me go."

I wanted to get out of this situation without insulting him, if I could, so I gave a sympathetic smile as I pushed Asakura off of me. The smile was probably rather strained, but I wasn't used to risqué situations like this, so it was the best I could do.

"Was it that bad?" he asked, a strange look on his face. My eyes widened.

"What? It's just that I don't like men that way!" It was like talking to an alien. There was absolutely no way to communicate with him. How could he see me like this and not understand that I didn't like it?

"How can you say that if you've never tried it? I know what I like."

"But that's not the problem! Please, can you get off of me?"

I pushed him. I couldn't worry about offending him as a customer anymore. He caught my arms and brought his perfect face close once more.

"Leave me alone!"

I didn't care if I lost this project anymore—I swung my arm back and slapped him. A crisp crack echoed through the room and my right hand ached, growing warm.

The fact that I had slapped him instead of punching him showed that some part of me had still been holding back.

"No one's ever reacted this badly before. But that just makes it even more exciting." Asakura held my wrist securely, his voice not even wavering as he spoke.

How was I supposed to respond to that?

"I've always been surrounded by flirts until now, men and women both. At first, I only wanted to tease you about never going to a love hotel, but now I wonder what you'd be like in bed."

He had forgotten all about business. Something in his eyes seemed to change in that moment. They had seemed distant; amused by things developing before them, but now there was a strange passion in his eyes.

"You're just frustrated because I didn't accept you. You don't actually want to do any of that with me!" I guessed frantically, trying to talk Asakura out of it.

I was sure that he was only interested in people who didn't throw themselves at him, the way a dog chases someone who flees from it.

Maybe if I pretended to desire a relationship with him, then that would cool his strange fever. This idea flitted through my mind, but I could never have acted it out convincingly. Even if I told myself it was just an act, my terror would win out.

Besides, I had been so desperate to get away that I had hit him. It was too late to pretend that I was interested now.

"I don't think that's true. Ever since I first laid eyes on you, I've wondered what you'd be like."

"Excuse me?"

I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. I hadn't picked up on that at all. Was that because I was obtuse or

because Asakura was good at hiding it?

"I like your face, Mister Kasuga. I wonder what it would look like in the throes of passion."

Asakura brought his lips close to my ear, pressing me into the bed. His deep voice flowed over me. I felt his teeth on my earlobe and a cold shudder ran through my body.

"How dare you—no! Stop!"

I tried to twist away from him, but he held me so securely I could barely move. I am not a small man, and I consider myself to be fairly strong, but he overpowered me completely. I felt something slimy trail over my earlobe and gritted my teeth in disgust.

"Nngh!"

I heard the wet slap of his tongue right next to my ear. I never touched that part of my body except when I was cleaning my ears. To feel his tongue crawling over it now filled me with a sensation unlike any I'd ever felt before. I balled the sheets up in my fists and my entire body tensed.

I could feel waves of excitement rolling through me. An uncontrollable passion was coursing through my body.

"You have sensitive ears."

I couldn't even respond to Asakura's taunting. It was all I could do to keep myself from crying out.

"There's no shame in being easy to excite. That just makes you more entertaining."

I had made a mistake in pleasing Asakura. I hated it, but every time I felt his breath against my earlobe, I shivered. My body was no longer obeying me.

My heart pounded wildly, reverberating in my ears.

"You're so cute, Minami."

I wanted to growl "don't call me that" at the familiar way he said my name, but all I could do was bite my lips tightly shut.

"Ah! Wh—what are you—?"

I was so focused on the sensations in my ear that I hadn't noticed Asakura pulling my shirt free of my belt. He slid his hand underneath it. It slid over the skin of my sides, then slid across my chest to stop just above my heart. It was as if Asakura were checking the speed of my pulse.

"Did you know that men's nipples are sensitive, too?" Asakura asked in a conspiratorial whisper as he lightly pinched one between his thumb and forefinger.

A prickling sensation shot through my body as he touched that part of me that I had been oblivious to for so long, and my shoulders shook.

"See? They're getting hard."

I gasped. He rolled his finger over the nipple and I clutched at Asakura's shoulders with weak hands.

"No—no, stop!"

I didn't even have time to consider how pathetic my begging was. I couldn't stay still under the tickling waves that bubbled up inside me. My feet slipped across the sheets.

"Stop? But then we can't go further."

Asakura nudged my thighs apart with his leg and pressed against me.

My secret was exposed. My cheeks burned.

In fact, when Asakura had been rolling his tongue so persistently around inside my mouth, I knew I was going to get in trouble. That was why I had tried so hard to get away from him.

"Your body likes me, at least."

He smirked and a burst of air caressed my earlobe.

"Nngh."

He sealed my lips with his own, his tongue rolling around my mouth as he stroked my nipples. It was hard to breathe, but it was even harder to feel bear the excited ache in the places where Asakura touched me.

What was I thinking?

"Minami, your tongue—" Asakura pulled his lips away slightly, whispering for me to let my tongue out to play.

Asakura's kiss felt like floating in warm water. My entire body felt relaxed. I stuck my tongue out mindlessly.

"Nngh—ah."

The kisses I had had before were nothing compared to this. An obscene, syrupy sensation began to rise in me, making me think these crazy things.

I felt so hot—it was too much. I panted and unconsciously reached to loosen the knot in my tie. My shirt was in disarray, but my tie was still tight.

"Is it hard for you?"

Asakura's large hand covered my own. I couldn't stop him from removing my tie and just gazed up into his face. He slipped my tie free of my collar and then began unbuttoning my shirt. A gasp escaped me at the

sudden sense of freedom.

Dominating my powerless body, Asakura stripped me of my shirt and jacket. Each time it felt as if my mind was returning to reality, his lips came over my own, stealing my reason with a deep kiss. I couldn't think anymore.

"You're all red now. Is it because I was playing with you?"

Asakura dragged his tongue along my collarbone, leaving a slow kiss behind as he moved toward my chest. He pressed his lips against my left nipple, the one he had been rubbing and pinching, and laughed gently against it.

"Mm!"

The wet, gentle sensation made my back arch. It was nothing like when he had touched me with his hand fingertips. The gentle caress was elusive, sending tiny shivers through my body.

"I've never had a virgin before, but these pure reactions of yours are making me regret that," Asakura whispered, one hand reaching deftly down to remove my belt and open the fly of my pants. He trailed his fingers over my underwear, confirming my reaction.

"Angh!"

The feeling of his fingers through the cloth was teasing. I ignored the voice in a corner of my mind that whispered that this was wrong and lifted my hips to press myself against his hand.

"Hm? You want more?"

My sluggish eyes caught the corners of Asakura's mouth curling into a smile. I looked away and closed my

eyes, meaning to deny it, but my fingers still clawed at the sheets.

I wanted something more, something solid. I was frantic from being teased like this. Heat suffused my body, but I couldn't sacrifice myself enough to beg Asakura for *that* yet.

"You're so stubborn, Minami. Has anyone ever told you that? Lucky for you, I like persuading people."

Clinging tightly to the sheets, my body shaking, I heard Asakura utter a sound of surprise. Holding my ankles, he pulled off my pants, which had only been pushed out of the way. He lowered his body between my parted legs so that I couldn't close them again and began to stroke my inner thigh.

"That's amazing. I can feel you twitching even through your underwear."

"Nn—stop, you're—nng!"

Asakura was resting his hand over me, feeling the shape of me through the cloth. He slowly tensed his hand, squeezing me—then released me. The constant shift between tension and freedom made my knees begin to naturally tighten around Asakura's body.

"I was right—you look nice when you're excited, Minami." Asakura's hot breath caressed my dry lips.

"Nng!"

The kiss was meant to keep back any words of resistance I might have.

I realized that in the same instant that Asakura pulled my underwear off and touched me directly. My mouth was covered, so I couldn't cry out. All I could do was tremble.

My shaft was enveloped, and as it quivered, I heard a soft, wet sound. Asakura's long fingers wrapped around me and drew forth my growing pleasure with obscene movements of his hand. The thought alone made my gasping breaths more passionate.

"You're all wet."

Without ever stopping the obscene motions of his hand, Asakura peeled his lips from my own and gazed into my eyes with a slight smile.

Asakura held the proof in his hand, so I couldn't deny it.

"Ah! Nngh! Wh-what are you doing?!"

"Don't move. Just relax and don't think about anything."

I thought I felt him touching me in a completely unexpected place, and the next moment I felt a finger inside my body. My body jerked up in surprise, pushing his finger in snugly from its shallow position and digging the back of my head into the sheets.

"Mmf—it's so—"

I felt something unpleasant stick in the back of my throat. I couldn't cry out, and I was afraid of thrashing my limbs. I squeezed my eyes shut, my body tense.

"It doesn't hurt, does it? I'll help you get used to it. It'll get so good you're going to scream."

I knew that was impossible. This uncomfortable pain could never feel good. There were many things I wanted to say, but my breathing was rough and I couldn't form a single word.

"Here, try focusing on this instead."

"Ah!"

As the finger of his right hand plunged into my body, he wrapped his left hand around my shaft. His wet fingers crawled over my skin, as if spreading the fluid over my entire body. When he did that to me, I could no longer tell if what I was feeling was pain or pleasure. The two melted together in confusion. I shook my head back and forth, sending the tears that had gathered at the corners of my eyes trailing down my cheeks. I felt Asakura lick the tears from my face and fluttered my tightly shut eyelids.

He looked up at me, his eyes cloaked with lust. He gazed at me, a harshly seductive expression on his face.

"It feels looser now, right? I'm going to put in another finger."

"You're going to wh—ah!"

He didn't give me any time to respond as he thrust another finger in beside the one that was already shoved into my body. This time it felt more painful than uncomfortable.

"Ow! Stop!"

There was no time to appeal to his pity. With each passing moment, more tears fell from my eyes.

"Ah—nngh. Don't—don't move."

He wasn't moving much, but the slight jerking of his fingers, as if they were exploring my body, sent cold shudders through me.

I twisted my body away, desperate, wanting to flee, but Asakura held my lower body firmly, and I stopped without much resistance.

"Ah!"

His fingers hit a strange spot inside my body,

sending a sharp sensation up my spine.

My entire body trembled.

"Did you like that?"

"Ah! Nngh!!"

He thrust his finger against the same spot once again and my vision clouded. I didn't think that would feel good, but I could feel the wet excitement between my thighs.

"You're so wet."

Asakura's wet hand slid up and down my warming shaft as his whispered low in my ear. Trying to breathe normally, I clung to the sheets with both hands, my body tense, and he pinned me to the bed.

"It's okay to be that excited by this. It feels like you're sucking on my fingers—you're twitching so hard in there."

Asakura pulled his fingers out of me as he spoke and I let out the breath I had been holding. Before I could feel relief at my new freedom, Asakura put a pillow under my hips and took firm hold of my waist.

"Ah—Asak—"

I realized what this position promised. In that same moment, something far greater than his fingers pushed aggressively into me.

"Angh!"

"Don't tense up."

It hurt, but—more than that, it felt warm. Even though Asakura told me not to tense up, I couldn't control my body: it tightened all on its own. I heard him mutter a single word, *sorry*, that fell across my back in a burst of warm air. Asakura tightened his grip on my hips.



My shoulders lunged away reflexively and he grabbed hold of them, plunging even deeper inside me.

"Nngh—ah!"

I didn't mean to cry, but large tears rolled down my face in a steady stream. I sucked in a breath, but despite my best efforts I couldn't utter the curses against Asakura that I felt in my heart.

"Breathe slowly. Take a deep breath... then let it out."

He pulled my lips apart and slipped his long fingers inside. My tongue pushed back against them instinctively, but when the tip of my tongue encountered something round, I hesitated.

It tasted sweet.

The sweet taste of cream spread across my tongue. It was somehow nostalgic.

Was this the candy Asakura had had in his pocket?

The unexpected sweetness of the candy dissolved much of the tension in my body.

"Nngh! Mm—ah!"

Asakura rocked against my body, as if he had anticipated my reaction, and a cry I couldn't fight back spilled out of my throat. The candy fell from my mouth with my scream.

Asakura knew what he liked. It wasn't pride that made him say that—it was experience. Even if it felt strange to have my body violated, it wasn't so incredibly painful.

"Ahh!! Nngh!"

The hands that gripped my waist circled around

to tease my penis. My back arched and I could feel my muscles tightening around Asakura's shaft, inside my body.

I felt Asakura gasp.

"Did you do that on purpose?" he whispered, his voice broken with rough breathing. I heard the words, but their meaning never reached my brain. "Mm. Damn it!"

Asakura spit out a curse and began rocking my body ruthlessly. My legs and arms were powerless and I could not resist.

"Nn—ah!"

I lost myself in the sensation that Asakura was devouring my very bones, doing exactly as he pleased with my body.

Then, as if a cord had been cut, the jolting stopped. Asakura's warm flesh fell across me. Our ragged breaths mingled beside my ear.

My body felt disgusting, sticky with sweat, but I was incapable of so much as lifting my arms. It was as if lead weights had replaced parts of my body. I felt so heavy that I wanted to sink into the bed.

Asakura slowly lifted himself off me and slipped his flaccid organ out of my body, which made my back quiver. Lying on my back, I could feel Asakura dragging his hand over my chest, but I didn't care anymore. He could do whatever he wanted.

"Sorry. I'll get it out for you."

Get what out? I thought blankly. Asakura lifted my knees and spread my legs open, then pressed his fingers into the aching part of me.

"S-stop—"

My body stiffened, trying instinctively to resist, but Asakura's shaft had so recently been buried inside me that his long fingers plunged in without meeting any resistance. He inserted another finger, and my body accepted it easily.

He buried his two fingers their entire length inside me before pulling them out, and I felt something sticky come with them. I suddenly understood what he'd meant about getting something out of me, and my face burned.

"No—please." My slight, hoarse voice punctuated the silence, pulled from my dry throat. "Ah!"

I don't care how softly I spoke—I knew he had heard me. We were right next to each other. His fingers pushed inside me again, but this time, they scraped against the walls inside my body, as if looking for something.

"Tell me if I hit a good spot."

"Wh—ah!"

"So here?"

The instant his fingers swept over one place, my thighs convulsed. He obsessively prodded the spot once more with his fingertips, seeing my reaction. Every time he touched it, my hips leapt from the bed.

"You're squeezing my fingers so tight. You must not want me to stop. Does it really feel that good?"

"I don't know why I—I—ah!"

This sensation that sent electricity coursing through my entire body, that streaked my vision with lightning flashes behind my closed eyelids—if this was pleasure, what had I ever felt until now? My head arched

back as I grit my teeth fiercely, my body shuddering with the fear of what I now understood was the pleasure Asakura drew out of me.

I was scared. I thought I would never feel rapture like this again, and I was terrified. Why had Asakura taught me this feeling?

"No, stop. I—I'm scared."

I cast aside my willpower and my pride to admit my fear.

Asakura's fingers paused for a moment, then he sealed my lips with a rushed, biting kiss and the movement of his fingers grew quick.

"Nngghah!"

I could feel my delicate flesh clinging to Asakura's fingers. His fingers plunged in and out, even as my muscles contracted intermittently. I clawed at Asakura's arm in my suffering, and though there was no strength in my hands, his lips finally released me.

"Ah—"

I took several shallow breaths, delirious, as Asakura trailed his fingers over my crotch. My skin, sensitive so soon after orgasm, twitched under his touch, overreacting to the slightest stimulus.

"It was good, wasn't it?"

Without touching my shaft, Asakura drew his fingers through the white fluid on my body, smiling slightly as he held it up, showing it to me.

I couldn't nod or turn away. I closed my eyes and my chest heaved.

The wild pounding of my heart sounded unbearably loud in my ears.

Chapter Two

Ugh. I felt heavy.

It was hard to breathe.

I felt like something was wrapped around my throat. I was going to die.

I realized I was being squeezed by a huge snake, almost nine feet long. I opened my mouth, struggling for breath, but something stuffed cream candies the size of golf balls into my mouth.

"Nngh!"

I moaned, in so much pain that my eyes snapped open.

A dream.

A strange, damp sweat clung to my back. The nightmare had dried my throat and made my entire body feel heavy.

"Ugh."

I could still feel something wrapped around me, like an echo of the dream.

"...ah!!"

My eyes flicked down to my stomach and I saw an arm that didn't belong to me. It held me, just like the snake in my dream. I writhed, in a panic to get away from it, but it only held me tighter, refusing me my liberty even in the tossing and turning of sleep.

My sleep-clouded mind cleared in an instant.

"A-Asakura?"

I twisted my head to look behind me. Asakura was there, asleep, clinging to me. His extreme sensuality stifled my cry. His face was childlike as he breathed peacefully in his sleep. He must have been an incredibly heavy sleeper to not wake up after all the noise I had made.

As soon as I saw Asakura's face, I remembered how I had come to be in this situation.

I had trouble believing it myself—that I had been raped by this man.

How could I have slept so peacefully in the arms of my rapist?

I managed to disentangle myself from the arm that wrapped around me, then crawled across the huge bed, trying to distance myself from Asakura. I had no idea what time it was. My eyes swept the room, searching for a clock. I saw an alarm clock that had tumbled into one corner of the bed and saw that it was after nine o'clock. The room had no window, so I couldn't be sure, but I didn't think I had been asleep very long. I decided it was nine at night.

I found my discarded clothes and dressed, keeping one eye always on Asakura.

I hurried down the staircase, wanting to get out of there before he woke up. As I moved, I felt a throbbing pain in my lower body. But it wasn't bad enough to keep me from walking, so I ignored it as best I could and cut through the room. I picked up my bag, still sitting on the sofa, and ran out into the hall.

The same middle-aged woman was at the front

desk as when I'd come. *What could I say if she asked me to pay for a room?* She must have remembered me from when Fujikawa showed me into the back, because she let me by with only a vague acknowledgment and no change in her expression.

I wondered what she thought I had been doing all this time. I was ashamed to think about it. I ducked my head, unable to look her in the eyes, and hurried past the desk.

As I stepped outside, the humid air enfolded my body. A rainbow of neon lights glowed on the narrow street, now filled with crowds of people, a stark contrast to the emptiness of the day.

I felt the sudden incursion of reality, as if I had finally escaped my nightmare. Normally I didn't like being in crowds, but now the crush of people was reassuring.

I slowly stumbled the few hundred feet to the station entrance, wondering how something like this had happened to me.

It had all begun the day before.

At eight o'clock, when the sun had not yet fully risen, I walked to work through the sweltering hell of office buildings. The August sun was merciless, scorching the asphalt day after day. The heat was so intense, even the setting of the sun couldn't dissipate all of it before the sun rose again. It was a vicious

cycle. Adding to that was the heat pouring out of the air conditioning systems in the thicket of office buildings, making the wind that blew through the valleys between them feel even warmer. I was on my way to work, but my shirt already clung to my sweaty skin. The one positive thing was that my office allowed us to dress casually. Of course we had to wear suits sometimes, but no matter how light the suit, it made me sick just to think about having to squeeze a tie around my throat in this constant heat.

"It's so hot." It didn't cheer me up to say this; it certainly didn't help lower the temperature.

I climbed up to the third floor of a building shared by multiple offices, up flights of concrete stairs. I touched the wall, which had not yet absorbed the heat and so felt cool and pleasant.

I opened the door at the top of the stairs marked Tomato Design Offices. Our tiny space was in disarray again this morning. All of the desks were buried in papers and folders, forming complex strata of work. I couldn't even see the surface of the desks. There was still another half hour before work started at nine, so no one was there yet except for Amamiya, the co-owner. Kawahara, the boss, might have been in the studio. They had started this company after graduating and together won an award for excellent design for an office chair they had designed together—their first product. I'd heard the company started when they posted their designs for furniture and knick-knacks on the internet and people had begun contacting them for projects.

At first, there had only been two of them, but they

got together with friends and classmates from school. At one point there were more than ten people in the company. Some went independent and others were recruited by larger companies, so it had settled into its current tiny size three years ago. Every year, there were many candidates attracted by their fame, and the majority of them were eliminated. I only found out about that after I was hired. I was the only one hired from my graduation year, in fact. This year there were none. The reason the numbers were so low was that they selected only a tiny elite. Their rationale was that it was more effective to have one talented person than ten useless, talentless people to get a job done.

Currently we had five employees, including me. One of those five handled the finances and business operations, so there were four of us working as actual designers. I joined the staff with a recommendation from a professor, since I was struggling to find a job in the difficult market. We had all graduated in different years, but all five of us had gone to the same art school. It had been three years after I'd graduated, but Kawahara and Amamiya were famous at the school even when I started.

Our studio was in the building's basement. That was where we constructed samples of things like furniture, whose essence we couldn't convey with computer graphics, to send out to be manufactured. We avoided large things that required special tools, occasionally taking individual orders for custom-made chairs and sofas that we would build in the studio. Tomato Design would accept any sort of design project

in any field. We had made furniture, knick knacks, and appliances. My specialty was interior designs, so I would be hired for homes and offices, and also to design the layout of car show displays or business conventions.

It made total sense.

When I found out about that, I was numb with anxiety. I was sure I wouldn't be hired. I still don't know why a company that probably wanted immediate results hired me. I don't think it was the fact that I stood out with my excellent grades in school, either.

At a welcoming party right after I'd been hired, Kawahara asked me who I thought the professor who recommended me had dirt on, him or Amamiya, and then he'd burst out laughing. They reassured me by saying they never hired anyone they thought couldn't do the job, but even now I feel strangely singled out.

"Morning, Minami. I've got some good news."

Amamiya was always the first in the office in the morning. I'd worked here for a year now, but I still hadn't gotten used to the sheer beauty of his face. He smiled and waved me over to his desk.

"What is it?"

I set my bag with my laptop in it on my desk, then went over to Amamiya's desk by the window. On my way, I walked through a cool stream of air from the air conditioning, which blew my bangs around and made me sigh appreciatively.

"Yeah. You remember that house you remodeled two months ago? The old woman's?"

"Oh, yes. The one who was getting depressed, and whose son wanted to remodel her house as an antique

townhouse." They had wanted to finish it before the rainy season started and decided on a remodeled antique design after discussions with the builders. I couldn't change the basic structure of the house, but I cut the living room in half, made two interior gardens, and connected the kitchen to the staircase. I used a lot of bamboo and wood and tried to make it look as much like the seventeenth century townhouses in Kyoto as I could.

"I think you did a great job on that, myself. The old woman and her son were happy, too. Your dedication really showed." Amamiya so rarely praised anybody that it made me both proud and embarrassed to hear him compliment me.

"Thank you. It was a pleasure to work on." It was the first project I had done entirely on my own. Of course I'd still gotten advice from Kawahara and Amamiya, but there had been a rush of projects at the time, so it might have been more the case that they didn't have the time to interfere with it. Still, the fact that they'd trusted me enough to let me do it on my own made me happy. I was truly contributing to the company.

"I put a picture of the house on our front page with your name under it, and now someone's asking for you by name."

"Really?! Me?" I leaned forward excitedly. There were a lot of people who asked for Kawahara or Amamiya by name, but this was definitely the first time anyone had asked for me. It felt like someone had sent me a love letter. Naturally, I was ecstatic.

"It's from a Mister Shinya Asakura, to design some

hotel interiors. It's a new building, not a remodeling."

My heart leapt. I enjoyed remodeling buildings well enough, but building something from the ground up was definitely more exciting.

"Here's a print-out of the request. It's got a brief description of the job and his address." Amamiya handed me a sheet of paper and I took it reverently, as if I was receiving an award.

"I—I'll do my best!" I was nearly shouting, my voice almost a shriek.

"Well, the first step is talking to the customer about his project. He included his address. It's up to you whether or not you want to take this job, Minami." Amamiya looked up at me with a wry smile. The calm of his voice pulled me back down to earth from the strange, rushing excitement that had taken hold of me.

"All right. I'll get in touch with him." I nodded enthusiastically, crumpling the paper with the strength of my grip, and went back to my desk.

"Morning!" someone called out sleepily as they opened the door. It was Kasumi Shino, the other designer, three years older than me. She had probably been out drinking the night before and that was what made her sound so sleepy. She was a magnificent beauty, but also the office's biggest booze hound. Even Amamiya, who was no slouch when it came to social drinking, was no match for her. To a lightweight like me, finishing off entire bottles of alcohol and eating salty dried fish like she did was more like a nightmare.

"Hey, Kasuga, what's that crumpled up paper you've got there?"

"Agh!"

Shino pointed at it as she walked past my desk and I scrambled to smooth the wrinkles out on my desk. I had crumpled it up unconsciously as soon as I'd gotten it in my hands.

"You'll never guess. It's from a customer who asked for me by name!"

I wanted to share my joy. I looked up at Shino as I handed her the wrinkled paper.

"Wow! It's your first time, right? You must be so happy. But stop looking at me so eagerly. I feel like I'm talking to an escort."

She peered at the crumpled paper and then glanced over at me, muttering teasingly and grinning.

"What's an escort?" I asked, surprised. I don't mean to insult escorts, but I didn't feel like she was complimenting me. I pouted.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't realize you hated your looks, like the queen over there."

Shino apologized off-handedly, without apparent malice. Amamiya, the "queen" she'd mentioned, shot an unpleasant look at her.

He was so amazingly beautiful and could actually chew out our boss Kawahara so ruthlessly that I had secretly begun to think of Amamiya as "the queen," too. But Shino was the only one who called him that in his hearing. Maybe that meant that Shino was the most powerful one in the office.

"Oh, it's nine! Time to get to work!"

Shino looked up at the clock on the wall and sat down at her desk, paying no attention to the glowering

looks Amamiya and I were giving her.

I looked up at the clock on the wall again and again, and finally it was three o'clock. Yesterday, I had called the phone number in Asakura's email, and we had decided to meet face-to-face to discuss the project.

I was happy the job was moving forward so quickly.

I stood up nervously and slung my bag over my shoulder, then took a deep breath.

"Don't stress yourself out, Minami," Amamiya said with a smile. He must have seen how extremely on edge I was.

"I'll try. Off I go!"

"Isn't your meeting at four? It might take a while, so you can just go straight home afterwards. If you need to take the client to dinner, you can charge it to us. If you keep the receipts, we'll pay your expenses for the meeting. You probably already know to do this, but if he starts asking about contracts, tell him the secretary will get in touch with him tomorrow."

"All right. Wish me luck!"

I had been to meetings any number of times with Kawahara or Amamiya. But this was the first time I was going on my own. I was afraid they didn't think I was reliable enough to go on my own, but Amamiya reassured me.

"The client might mistreat you since you're

so young. If he does, you don't have to take the job. Just decline it if it's going to give you a lot of grief," Amamiya said and grinned. "Have a good time."

Shino, Amamiya, and even the secretary Takagi wished me luck as I left the office. At the top of the stairs, I ran into Kawahara, who was coming up. His grey coveralls were covered in fine sawdust; he must have been carving wood in the studio.

"Minami? Leaving already? I've got to say, that plain old suit doesn't look quite right."

I sighed at his unexpected teasing. I was going to meet my client for the first time today, so I had put on a suit for work, which I rarely did. I wasn't used to wearing them, so I probably didn't look very impressive, but Kawahara always teased me like this. He meant it as a joke. It would only make him happier if I got annoyed and said something back. It was smarter to let it just roll off my back.

"Look who's talking."

"I guess. Whenever I wear a suit, I end up looking like a bodyguard."

Kawahara didn't like suits either, but for a different reason than me. He had an unusually big build for a Japanese person and ready-made clothes were always tight on him, but since he didn't wear suits often enough to bother having them tailor-made, on those rare occasions that I saw him wearing a suit, they looked comically small.

"Do you have enough time to get there?"

"Oh my god! I have to go!"

It took only twenty minutes to get to the hotel

from here by subway. I didn't really need to hurry that much, but I wouldn't feel comfortable cutting it close.

"Don't accept candy from strangers!" Kawahara's mocking words followed me down the stairs.

Am I in kindergarten, suddenly?

It would have been childish to turn around and shout back at him, so I just grumbled to myself. Maybe this conversation had just been Kawahara's way of distracting me from my anxiety. Had he really come all the way from the studio just for me? I only thought of this possibility as I was buying my ticket for the subway.

If only he had been a little more honest in his efforts to cheer me up, I could have thanked him.

My heart had been pounding in anticipation for hours that day before I went to the hotel. I wanted to punch myself, to give myself a wake-up call. I wanted to stop myself from ever going to the hotel.

I never intended to contact Asakura again, of course, but considering how excited I had been about the commission, I would need a reason that I could give to Amamiya and Kawahara for refusing Asakura's project.

Would the simple excuse that we couldn't reach an agreement about what he wanted on the project fool them? They could be oddly insightful sometimes. I wasn't sure it would work, but what else could I say? All I wanted right now was to sleep in my own bed.

For a moment, I had actually enjoyed the feeling

of Asakura's hands and kisses. I had cried out in ecstasy as he delved into my body. I wanted to lock those memories away forever.

I sighed deeply.

The few minutes it took to walk to the station seemed like an eternity.

Chapter Three

I stumbled back to my apartment after Asakura had had his way with me. The shock and regret made it impossible to sleep that night. Echoes remained of the night's activities everywhere in my body, even the next morning. When I went to work, I knew everyone would ask me how the meeting had gone.

There was no way I could tell them he'd shoved me down and raped me, then just laugh it off. To be honest, I wanted to call in sick. I put off leaving the house as long as I could, but somehow managed to get myself ready and leave. I got to the building just under the wire and made a last break for the door.

"Huh?"

I stopped my hand mere inches from the door knob. Inside the office, I heard Kawahara and another man whose voice I recognized, but it wasn't Amamiya.

"So that building is one of the ones you inherited from your grandfather?"

"Yes. Of course, I had a lot of input in the interior design. I wasn't about to compromise and lower the value of the place."

"I understand how you feel, Mister Asakura."

Asakura?!

Kawahara's words brought the voice into new clarity, and this time I shook when I heard it. What was

Asakura doing here? I was frozen by the voices within. When someone tapped me on the back, I jumped.

"Why are you standing in front of the door, Kasuga?"

"Agh! Uh—good morning, Shino."

Shino's eyes grew wide at my exaggerated surprise.

"Um, no reason. I was just lost in thought."

I think I was pretty tense, but I forced a smile and opened the office door.

"Ah, there you are, Minami!"

Kawahara appeared from the pathetically small meeting room in one corner of the office. He waved me over eagerly and I walked over to the partitioned walls of the area. There was no mistaking Asakura as he sat opposite Kawahara. Today he was dressed in a nice suit.

The moment our eyes met, memories of everything that had happened yesterday flooded my mind and my heart gave a twinge of fear.

"Good morning, Mister Kasuga." He smiled at me without any ulterior meanings, as if nothing had happened yesterday.

"Good morning. Thank you for seeing me yesterday."

I couldn't ignore Asakura in front of Kawahara and the rest of the office, so I hesitantly returned his greeting. Kawahara motioned for me to sit beside him. "Apparently you forgot your camera at Mister Asakura's yesterday. He was kind enough to bring it back, since he needed to come in for the contract negotiation anyway."

My camera?!

Kawahara pointed to the coffee table between us and there sat my very own camera. I had been taking pictures of the room, I remembered, and it had fallen out of my hands when Asakura had shoved me into the bed. I was so desperate to get out of there that I had completely forgotten about it.

When I heard the words "contract negotiation," a terrible foreboding filled my heart.

"Yes, Mister Asakura called me yesterday and said that after meeting with you, he knew he wanted you to do the project. I asked him to come to the office to discuss the contract. I was going to call you, but I couldn't get a hold of you. Your phone must have been dead."

"Oh!"

He was right. When I stumbled back to my apartment last night, I hadn't wanted anyone to bother me, so I'd turned my phone off. I had never signed up for a land line, so by turning off my cell phone I made it impossible to contact me.

"Luckily we've worked out all the details of the contract. Now you just have to listen to everything Mister Asakura tells you, and design something that'll satisfy him."

"What?!"

Kawahara handed me a bundle of papers with a huge grin. I clearly saw Asakura's stamp and signature beside Kawahara's, which represented the company.

It was official.

I didn't mean any offense to Kawahara, who couldn't have known that I wouldn't be ecstatic about

this, but—what had this bastard done to me?! If I broke the contract after it was drawn up, we would have to pay a fee. And since Asakura's request was a large-scale project, the fee we would have to pay for breaking it was correspondingly large. It would be much too large for me to assume the responsibility of paying it myself and since it showed the company's trust in me, I couldn't break the contract except under extraordinary circumstances.

I would say that being raped by the client counted as extraordinary circumstances.

How would Kawahara and Asakura react if I revealed it right then? I wondered bitterly, but I could never say something so embarrassing.

"I look forward to working with you, Mister Kasuga."

Asakura smiled with a smarmy affability and reached out to shake my hand. I took his hand, praying that Kawahara wouldn't notice how much I shook.

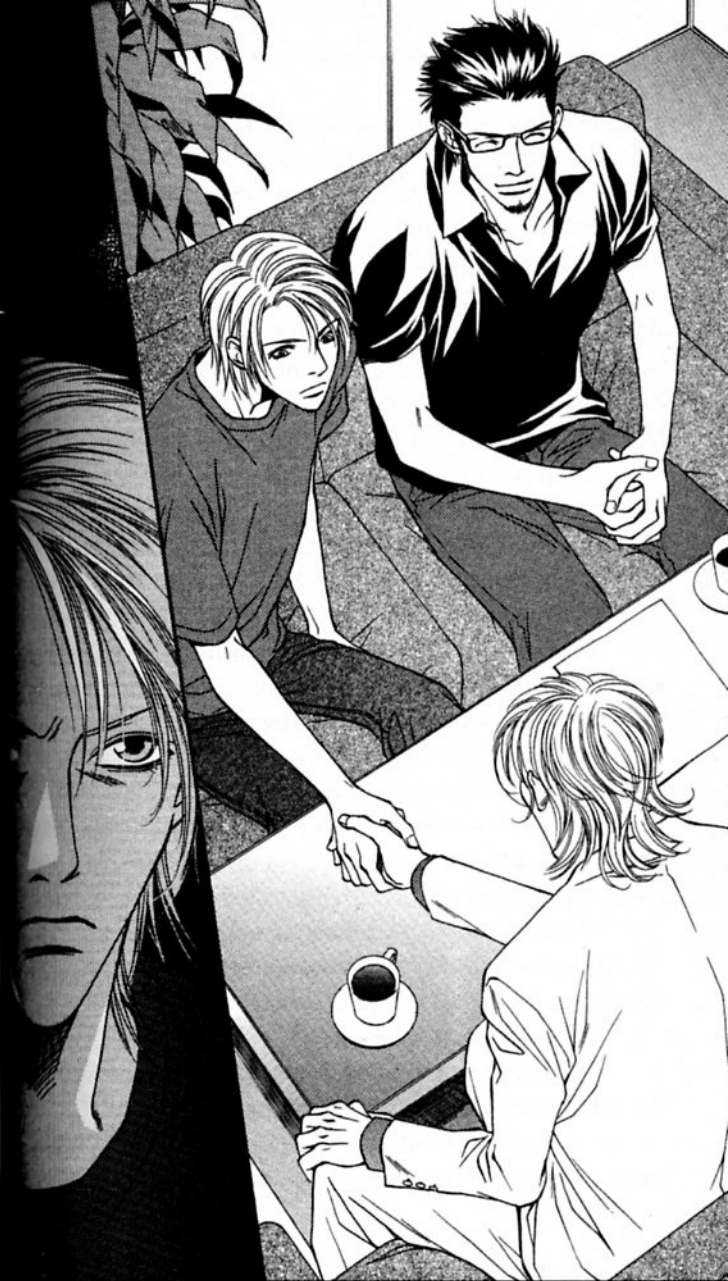
"So do I, sir."

I squeezed hard on Asakura's hand with all my strength, avoiding Kawahara's notice. Asakura's face tightened with pain, but his smile never faltered. It was magnificent, in a way.

"I'm sure you two have a lot to discuss, so I'll let you get to it. I'll let Kasuga handle the rest of your questions, Mister Asakura."

"All right. Thank you for all your help."

As Kawahara picked up the contract and stood, Asakura got up as well and bowed to him politely. If I didn't know that he was a rapist, Asakura would seem like an impeccably nice young man. Kawahara disappeared



on the other side of the partition and Asakura sat back down. He stared at me shamelessly.

"You think I've forgotten about yesterday? What are you trying to do here?"

It seemed idiotic to speak politely to my rapist, so I was curt, but I hurled my questions at him in a low voice so that the others wouldn't hear, since we were separated only by a low partition.

"I haven't forgotten, either. How could I forget how wet you got when I touched you, Minami?"

"Shut up!"

Asakura spoke these disgusting words without a single change in his expression. I knew my reaction was exactly what he wanted, but my face burned.

"Damn you."

I covered my mouth with a trembling hand, trying to hide my blush as best I could.

"I like you, Minami. First it was your designs I liked, and now it's the way your body communicates with me. I want both of those things."

I couldn't believe this man. I had never met someone as arrogant as this before. I didn't know what to say and simply stared at Asakura in disbelief.

"I can't count the number of people I've slept with, but this is the first time anyone has really captivated me. Don't you think that's what love is?"

"You—what? Excuse me?!"

Asakura seemed to be pressing me for a reply. He moved around the low table to sit beside me.

I was about to scream "Don't come near me, you bastard!" and throw a punch, but everyone in the office

would hear that. I couldn't think of a justification for hitting Asakura besides telling the truth, so I could only resist him in the smallest way.

"Get away from me!" I swore at him quietly, and a smile slowly twisted the corners of Asakura's mouth. It was a terrible thing to see.

"I may have mentioned this to you yesterday, but the exterior and the steel framework of the hotel that I'd like you to do the designs for is largely finished. Once the designs for the rooms are decided, we can wrap the construction up quickly."

He was talking about business in a normal tone of voice—but at the same time, his hand stroked my body gently. I was dressed casually today, and I could feel the heat of Asakura's body through my T-shirt.

"I-I see! Then I'll try to get some sample designs to you as soon as I can."

As I answered, I pinched and slapped away his groping hand, slipping away from him toward the edge of the sofa. The man was outrageous, taking advantage of the fact that I couldn't openly resist him.

"What I want from you, Mister Kasuga, is something completely different from the three hotels I run currently. I've been planning this hotel to be my last, and I've been thinking of making it entirely my own."

"I see."

Excited by his own description, Asakura's hand tried to burrow under my T-shirt.

I was nearing the limits of my patience and started to get up from the sofa.

"So I'd like you to tour all the hotels." Asakura

caught the waistband of my jeans as I stood up and pulled me back down.

The others in the office could only hear our voices, which followed the usual script, so they had no idea anything was amiss. They would never have imagined what was actually going on. I was making cursory responses, but actually I was only half-listening to what Asakura said. Even if I heard every word he said, my brain didn't process it.

"Give it a rest, please."

I grabbed Asakura's shirt and pulled his face close, glaring into his eyes. *Don't you dare think you can do whatever you want and I won't fight back.* I was considering head-butting him when he smiled.

"You're aggressive, aren't you?"

Asakura reached up to grab the back of my head and pull me closer.

Agh!! What's he doing?! I thought in a panic, screaming in my mind but unable to speak. His lips were on mine before I could get away. He was incredibly quick.

I regretted being so careless in bringing our faces so close together, but it was a little late for that now. I grit my teeth and started to defend myself, so this didn't go any further.

"Wh—nngh!"

Sadly, that last defense didn't last even ten seconds.

His large hand crawled up my jean-clad thigh, his fingers trailing over my crotch. I opened my mouth with a sound of surprise, and Asakura moved in naturally to

thrust his tongue between my teeth. Only a thin partition separated us from everyone else in the office.

I didn't think anyone was watching us, but if someone stuck their head in, the charade would be at an end. I fought back his rolling tongue desperately, beating my fists on Asakura's shoulders again and again. I also stomped heavily on his expensive-looking leather shoes.

"Ow—"

Just stomping lightly on his toes with the heel of my shoe was painful enough. He finally released me, muttering. I was breathing heavily, glaring at Asakura as I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I couldn't believe him. Who acted like that?

I felt like this latest affront took it beyond the question of whether he was just shameless or selfish.

"That hurt."

"Good. If we weren't in the office right now, I would have punched you!"

Asakura and I hissed at each other in whispers. It was hard to make the threat in such a low voice.

"Then shall we go somewhere else?"

Asakura patted me on the shoulder, his voice cheerful again. I wondered if he wanted everyone to overhear him. His voice was loud enough.

"What? Where?"

I couldn't follow this twist in the conversation. Asakura stood up from the sofa and gazed down at me in my confusion. A vague smile floated onto his handsome face.

"It would be a little rushed if we tried to do

everything in one day. I'll just give you a tour of the first hotel today. Oh, you should get permission first, though, shouldn't you?" Asakura said, as if to himself. He walked out through the partitions.

"Mister Kawahara? I was thinking of showing Mister Kasuga my other hotels—would that be all right?"

"Of course, that's no problem. I'm sure he'll get a lot out of it."

Kawahara answered enthusiastically, ignorant of Asakura's secret. I stiffened. I felt like a poor girl whose family had sold her into prostitution. I had no right to protest.

I glared at him in silence, but Asakura only looked at me and jerked his head to say we could go.

I couldn't act so reluctant, or the others would start to get suspicious. I sluggishly stood up and poked my head out from behind the wall.

"I'll be back."

"Make us proud!"

Kawahara and Amamiya were smiling at me in such obvious pride that I wanted to cling to them, screaming not to make me go, but of course I couldn't really do that. I put my camera into my bag, then slung it over my shoulder. With one last word of goodbye, I followed Asakura out of the office.

If Kawahara and the others hadn't been there, I could have refused to go. I glared at Asakura's broad back, vowing that the next time he molested me, I would break his arms.

Chapter Four

Asakura took me to one of the city's suburbs, forty minutes away in his white BMW. With its tinted windows, it didn't look like something an honest man would drive around in, but it wasn't too bad. We stopped outside the chalky white walls of his hotel.

If yesterday's hotel had been built to look like a business hotel, this one was more like a cottage or boarding house. Since it was outside the city, the hotel was three times as big as the one I'd seen yesterday. Perhaps on the assumption that people would come by car, there was also a large parking lot.

We pulled into the parking lot and a young man ran over to guide us to an open spot. Asakura opened the window and the man bowed politely. "Hello, sir. There's a space in the back, if you'll just drive around."

He was very typical of kids these days with his bright red hair, and his politeness was almost shocking as a result.

"All right. Back there?" Asakura mumbled, parking his car between the two white lines of the space. He never once called attention to the fact that he was the hotel's owner.

I wouldn't have expected anyone else to come to a place like this in the middle of the afternoon, but there were several other cars in the lot.

There was something was strange about this. After the way Asakura had acted with Fujikawa yesterday, I had expected him to treat his subordinates with more authority and arrogance, but this was...normal.

"The entrance is over here."

Asakura locked the car after I got out and started walking toward the hotel. He never turned around to look at me once. He must have been sure that I wouldn't try to run away.

For a second, I thought about running. But I thought about the fact that we had been squeezed together, alone, in the car during the long drive here and he had never tried any funny stuff. I decided to follow him. Besides, I wanted to see the hotel. I knew it was dangerous, but I couldn't contain my curiosity. It seemed that this project was real, anyway, so I definitely needed to see the other hotels that Asakura ran.

"Do people actually come here in their own cars?"

I didn't know anything about these places, but I had heard about this from a friend of mine from college. I imagined there were a lot of guests who would want to avoid being seen by others.

Asakura glanced back at me, walking slowly.

"It would be easy to fully automate, and that would save me on salaries. But it's important to keep the human touch, don't you think? It's very important not to be secretive about sex. My philosophy is, it's not shameful, so be confident. If people don't like that, there are plenty of other hotels they can use."

There was something appealing about what

Asakura said. That was no doubt how he got into relationships without differentiating between men and women. On the surface he was an attractive man, but inside he was a beast.

Automatic doors painted with the golden logo of the Half Moon hotel slid open and let us into the building. The front desk was a lot like the one I'd seen yesterday, right down to the fact that there was a middle-aged woman about my mother's age standing behind it. This must have been part of Asakura's "human touch." And if the guests didn't like it, they could go somewhere else. He was so extreme. Behind the desk, I saw something that looked like a switchboard, with all the room numbers on it. The hotel I saw yesterday hadn't had that. There were little light bulbs, which seemed to indicate if the room was in use or not.

"Hello," Asakura said to the woman behind the desk.

"Oh, Mister Asakura!" Her eyes widened in surprise.

"This is Mister Kasuga, an interior designer. I'm going to give him a tour of the rooms. Could you give me the key to, I don't know, Room 303?"

"Certainly, sir."

The woman turned around behind the desk to a key card holder mounted on the wall. She picked one out and the light under Room 303 clicked off on the switchboard. Now I understood: there was wiring connecting the cards and the panel.

"Are you interested in seeing any other rooms, Mister Kasuga?"

I was staring at the panel, thinking, and Asakura came to stand beside me and look at the panel, too.

"No, that's okay."

"Then let's go."

Perhaps because the woman behind the desk was watching us, Asakura didn't do anything creepy. Was he being professional now?

I turned the problem over and over in my mind, staring at Asakura's back.

"I had some room to play around with. Even though the building's three stories high, there are only five rooms per floor. You can get to the upper floors with the elevator or the stairs," Asakura explained professionally as he led me into the stairwell, climbing one step at a time.

There was a large decorative window at each landing, filling the stairwell with plenty of natural light.

"Room 303 is over here. The lighting and wallpaper are a little different, but the basics are the same in every room."

"Okay."

I was quivering, but ready. I almost felt like I was imagining things about Asakura.

He had brought me here for a serious business meeting. I had to calm down and be professional. He was an inscrutable man, an indiscriminate rapist, but he was also a client who would shower profits on my company. Kawahara was so easy-going that he always refused the high volume projects from major corporations and instead took small custom orders for furniture as a sort of hobby. Amamiya would never let it show, but I

suspected that in the old days of recession, the company had not had an easy time staying afloat. I knew that I wouldn't be coddled as the new recruit forever: I worked for Tomato Design and I had to make myself useful!

With this vow in mind, I walked through the door Asakura opened for me.

An aquatic world spread out before me. The wallpaper was white with light blue stripes, the curtains sky blue. There were navy sheets spread on the large bed and two dark blue rectangular pillows. I looked up at the ceiling, where a family of whales was painted, swimming through the ocean. The only thing not following the theme was a small, honey-colored wooden table and two matching chairs.

"Um, what's that?"

I was looking slowly around the room when my gaze fell suddenly on something I wouldn't have expected to see in most rooms. There was a huge puddle, but—it couldn't really be a puddle.

"Oh, it's a pool. This hotel follows an extensive water theme. There's also a bathroom about that size in each room."

Asakura called it a pool without any fuss, quite oblivious to my deep surprise.

The part of the room with the bed and table was 175 square feet. The pool area was almost the same size. How bizarre—or maybe I just didn't know anything and this kind of hotel was always like this.

"I created Hotel Moon, the hotel you saw yesterday, to be a bare bones business hotel. It may be close to the station, but I thought of it as satisfying simple, casual

tastes rather than being a place to luxuriate."

I was so surprised, I couldn't even grunt in surprise, but Asakura paid no attention, continuing his explanation without missing a beat.

"Here, I used the theme of water. I think people feel most at ease near water. My other hotel takes green as its theme. The rooms are full of potted plants, so they become almost jungle-like."

Asakura chuckled. I stared at him in silence.

What sort of rooms should I design for him? I was much more nervous now.

At that moment, my gaze locked with Asakura's. My anxiety, completely inexpressible, must have shown in my face.

"What I want you to do," he began in a quiet voice, "is at the new hotel. I've already picked the name: Crescent Moon. I want you to design rooms along the theme of 'harmony,' where people can feel at peace. We can't go inside the building yet, but I can give you the blueprints soon. You can make your designs in reference to that."

Now I understood why he'd asked for me after seeing the photo of my last job, but what did he mean by "harmony"? What kind of harmony was he looking for? We would have to talk it over and boil the idea down into something concrete.

"But please have a look around the room. You can take a dip in the pool, if you'd like."

"All right."

My curiosity pressed me forward and I took the short staircase from the room down to the pool.

There were foam pads around the pool, locked together like a jigsaw puzzle. That made them easy to switch out, and also helped with drainage.

My bag kept falling forward as I tried to peer into the water, so I set it on the floor and approached the pool. It was tiny, only about three meters long.

I reached out to touch the water and discovered it was slightly warm. It was small enough to change the water often, so there was none of the typical disinfectant scent of chlorine. What was the pool made of? And how deep was it?

I held onto the edge of the pool and peered into the water.

"Agh!"

The edge was wet: my hands slipped and I fell in. I made a loud splash.

"Minami?!" Asakura cried out my name, his professional attitude gone.

I broke through the surface of the water and coughed. It had been so sudden, I had swallowed some water. I discovered how deep the pool was with my body. The water came up to my stomach, so it was around three feet deep.

I felt like such an idiot.

"Are you okay?"

Asakura ran up to the pool. He reached down to me and I took his hand automatically. It was a mistake to accept the help of an enemy.

"I'm fine—sorry."

The town I grew up in was by the ocean, and as children we always threw each other into the water.

Compared to that, this was nothing, but it had been so long since I last fell into the water that I was in shock.

"I'll get your clothes dried for you. Let me have them."

"That's okay! It's not that cold out. I can just wring them out and they'll dry while I wear them."

I shook my head frantically at Asakura's order to take my clothes off. Normally, I wouldn't care about being naked in front of another man. I wasn't that prudish, but Asakura was the least principled man I'd ever met. I had no idea at what moment his lust would switch back on. I had to be careful.

"Maybe your shirt will, but your jeans are never going to dry like that. You know you can catch a cold even in the summer. You don't want people to make fun of you for catching the flu in the middle of summer, do you? We have laundry machines in the hotel so we can dry your clothes for you. Don't be shy."

Asakura reached out for me as he said this and I pulled away.

"F-fine!" I shouted back. "Thank you. But I can get undressed by myself."

I peeled my sopping wet T-shirt off with difficulty, then tossed it on the floor. I took off my shoes, and that left only my jeans, which were heavy with all the water they'd soaked up. I was worrying about what to do with the last layer of clothes when a bathrobe fell over my face.

"You might as well dry your underwear while you're at it. It would be pretty uncomfortable to let them dry on their own, anyway."

"All right."

I hadn't forgotten to be cautious with Asakura, but the unpleasant stickiness of the cloth on my skin finally won me over. I closed the front of the bathrobe and tied the belt tightly before peeling off my underwear.

"Give it to me. I'll take it downstairs."

I balled my clothes up and put them in a bag. Asakura climbed up the short steps out of the pool area. I heard his voice, muffled by distance, for several moments, as if he were talking on the phone.

What was I thinking, letting Asakura take all of my clothes from me?

I gazed at the placid surface of the pool and felt sorry for myself. If I had to sum it up in one word, it would be just that: "idiot". If I told Kawahara what had happened, I knew he would call me exactly that.

"Minami? Apparently it's time for the shift change, so the maids have all gone home. It'll take an hour for the next shift to get here. I'm sorry. Do you have time to wait?" Asakura looked down at me from the room above.

I would have been fine with drying them in the sun. That might even have been faster. I was going to suggest it, but the mental image of my clothes, including my underwear, hanging out the window of the hotel shut me up.

"I guess that's okay."

Asakura nodded and disappeared again. He took the bag with my clothes into the hall. I heard the door shut.

I felt like I'd thrown myself into a trap.

I gazed down at the gently lapping water of the pool and let out a deep sigh.

"You should dry your hair, too," I heard Asakura say from much closer than I expected. I spun around in surprise. My vision was obscured by a soft white towel being draped over my head.

"H-hey! I can do that myself!"

Asakura dried my hair briskly, as if I were a child. I grabbed for the towel, but accidentally grabbed Asakura's hand, which only frustrated me more. I tried to jerk my hand back quickly, but this time Asakura held it.

"Uh—really, I can take care of the rest. Um—please."

The towel still covered my eyes, so I didn't know what expression Asakura was wearing. I nervously told him to let me go, and I hurried out of his grasp.

I didn't know why I was acting so awkward. I stared at the floor, agonizing. I felt like prey being watched by a predator. If he was full, he wouldn't attack me, but my nerves were on end, tuned to my enemy's movements.

"If you keep your guard up that much, I won't be able to do anything."

"What?"

I heard Asakura's laughing voice rain down over my head.

I had trouble understanding what he meant. I looked up and he caught my face in both hands. "Do you not understand the implications of being alone in a hotel room with a man who has ulterior motives?"

"What? But we were talking about business! Why are you talking about this all of a sudden?"

Asakura was bearing down on me, his face lecherous, and I retreated in a daze, but he held my head tightly and I couldn't put any distance between us. I bent my body away, glaring at Asakura, face-to-face.

"You've got enough partners that you shouldn't need to force someone who doesn't want you! If you let go of me right this second, I'll forget all about this."

I wondered what he would do if I bit him on the nose. Asakura pulled his handsome face closer and I really considered doing it.

"Agh!"

I was just about to bite him when my plans unintentionally changed. Asakura suddenly released his powerful grip on my head. I had been pulling so hard against him that I felt myself flying through the air. I started falling backwards, completely defenseless. True fear coursed through my mind and I threw my arms around Asakura's neck. I saved myself from falling over and breathed in relief, but when I felt arms circling around my waist, I realized the true danger I was in.

"You're enthusiastic, aren't you?" Asakura whispered with a laugh, clinging to me.

Enthusiastic?! What in the world made him come up with a word like that in a situation like this? I writhed, struggling to break out of Asakura's arms. I was a pretty powerful guy, so I didn't think it would be easy for him to stop me from resisting, but his grip made it impossible to so much as move a muscle. I remembered my dream about being smothered by the huge snake.

"Let me go! This is going way too far!"

I lashed out at him, but Asakura's aloof expression never faltered.

"Going too far? Since when are there limits? I said it yesterday, but this is the first time anyone's ever acted so disgusted by me. It just makes me want you more, Minami."

"How can you be so arrogant? You're disgusting! You think you're so irresistible?!"

I was completely naked under the terry cloth bathrobe. That thought made me uncomfortably aware of Asakura's hands on my back and hip. I kept talking, trying to hide the fact that I was blushing. Even I had no idea what I was saying after a while.

All Asakura did was look impressed with me and smile.

"You're right. Very good."

I was flabbergasted by the fairness or the strange honesty of his easy confirmation.

"You're the second person to say that to my face."

Asakura sounded pleased by that and brought his lips to mine.

"Mmf!"

I tried to turn my face away, but Asakura anticipated that: he grabbed my hair and turned up the temperature on the kiss. His tongue plunged into my mouth as if it belonged there, rolling across my gums.

I was disappointed in myself, but I felt my knees tremble and lose strength, forcing me to lean on Asakura for support. Asakura's kiss was intense, full

of an eroticism that robbed me of my tenacity and will to resist. It made me painfully aware of the childish imitations I had thought of as kisses before.

"Nngh—no."

My mind clouded, threatening to consume even that refusal.

I hate to say it, but...it felt good.

No! Was my body succumbing to the pleasure, threatening to be seduced by it?

In all my twenty-three years of life, I never remembered being so consumed by a desire that made me feel this alive. I hadn't even felt it when I was a teenager, so I had sometimes wondered if I was asexual. I found it hard to believe that I would be this swept away by a kiss from a man, no matter how talented he might be. I knew I had to do something.

"Minami? You're crying. Is it that good?"

The soft breath of Asakura's laugh caressed my lips.

I had no authority and was barely holding myself up with Asakura's support, but my eyes flashed angrily at the mockery in his voice.

"Admit it. You like kissing me. Your body has already confessed."

Asakura's knee pushed my legs apart. I tried to flee, but his hands pulled my hips closer.

"Hey!"

Our bodies were pressed together, and I bit my lip against the eagerness my body felt, ignoring the wishes of my heart. I couldn't explain away the proof I knew he felt there. I couldn't stop my hands from shaking as they

clung to Asakura's shoulders.

"How sweet. Is it too hard to stand?" Asakura whispered lewdly, his lips pressed against my ear. He bit down slightly on it as he spoke.

"Ah—don't do that!"

A shudder ran down my spine and goosebumps prickled my skin. I couldn't believe how strongly I was reacting to such slight stimulation.

"Nngh—don't touch me!"

Asakura was dressed in a suit, but I had only a bathrobe to cover me. He slipped a hand between the folds of cloth to touch my skin. As I struggled, the robe slipped from my shoulder, making me look even more depraved.

Asakura's hand was so warm...

It slid around my side and rested on my back. I bit down on my lips, desperately fighting back the cry of pleasure that threatened to escape me.

"Nngh! Mm—"

Asakura darted his tongue into my ear and traced its shape as his hands crawled all over my body. I lost all sense of the pleasure and what it was doing to my body.

"Ah!"

His hand slid from my ribs down to my hips and buried itself easily between my legs. His large hand gripped my erection and my body tensed.

"You're so warm—and look, you're dripping. Can you feel that?"

"Ah! No!"

He rubbed his finger over the head of my shaft. I was as wet as he said, and his finger moved smoothly.

My body was reacting to it so much, despite my protests, that I could no longer claim Asakura was having no effect. Every time he moved his fingers I heard a slimy noise.

"Once you get like this, you can't hold yourself back. You're just bubbling with excitement."

With exquisite power, he held the entire thing in his hand, squeezing it tightly then—a moment later—releasing it. He wasn't just playing with me aimlessly; he was taking the time to feel my entire shape. This was far beyond the pleasure I got from masturbating. An intense passion filled my entire body. I couldn't think anymore.

"Ah—it's going to—nngh! Let me go!"

I wanted him to get off of me since I was approaching my limits, but Asakura only goaded me on, teasing the tip of my shaft with his fingers.

"Ahh—ah! Ah!"

I buried my head in Asakura's shoulder as my body convulsed. I didn't even have the power to cling to him and I sank down onto the foam pads on the floor.

Panting heavily, I bit into my wrist, trying to stop my body from trembling.

"Don't do that."

Asakura pulled my hand from my mouth. I looked up at him, in a daze. He held my hand and bent over me, bringing his lips to mine.

I didn't even have the desire to flee anymore. I unconsciously responded to his tongue as it twisted inside my mouth.

"Mm—"

Every time Asakura's tongue darted behind my teeth, my shoulders trembled obediently. My body responded to even the smallest stimulation now that I had orgasmed. It was easy for him to reignite the smoldering ashes of my lewd excitement. As Asakura slowly pulled away, I caught myself whispering for more and starting to follow him. I hung my head in shame.

"Let's go somewhere more comfortable."

My body throbbed with tension at the soft whisper against my ear.

Did he mean—? I was sure he was suggesting we go to bed.

"Uh—no, that's—"

"Don't fight it."

As I started to argue, Asakura lifted me in his arms and I clung hastily to his shoulder.

"I'm too heavy. You're going to hurt your back."

It was nothing like how you would carry a woman. I wasn't a muscular guy, but I still weighed around 130 pounds.

"Yeah, you are heavy. So don't struggle unless you want me to drop you. But I'm strong, so don't worry."

He said I was heavy, but still he took the short staircase with steady steps. Run in

He set me down on the big bed. I started to get up, but Asakura rolled down beside me and wrapped his arms around me.

"You're right: it was kind of hard."

"Good!"

I was tense, but it didn't seem like he was going to make a move. I sighed and stared up at the ceiling. I

looked at the family of whales. I don't know why, but in the end I didn't want to fight Asakura's hands on my body anymore. Even if I attacked him physically, there was no chance I could get away. I knew I was going to be conquered by the pleasure and swept away.

I still couldn't picture myself doing things like that with a man.

Maybe I was just more open-minded than I had thought. Or rather, maybe sometimes my moral barriers were just low?

"You're heavy, Mister Asakura."

Half his body was draped over mine, so of course he felt heavy. He didn't reply.

"Mister Asakura?"

I peered down at Asakura's face, which lay on my shoulder. His eyes were closed and I heard rhythmic breathing.

"How can you be asleep?"

I couldn't believe it. He'd fallen asleep in less than a minute. He was like a little kid.

He was still fully dressed in his suit, and his tie was even still tight around his neck. How could he sleep like that?

I tried to get out from under Asakura, but he was hugging me like a pillow and his legs were tangled with mine, so I couldn't budge.

"You think I won't wake you up?"

Then I thought of all the evil spirits who appear that way in fairy tales and gave up. I fell back into the bed. Not only had I left work the other day to submit to obscene acts without even token resistance, and then

orgasmed, now we were taking a little nap.

I would die before I told Kawahara or Amamiya about this.

I listened to Asakura's happy breathing and started to get sleepy, too. I felt so shameless to be lying here, letting my rapist sleep beside me with his arms around me. With that thought, my heavy eyelids shut.

I heard the sound of a telephone ringing.

Whoever it was, I thought it was pretty rude of them to call while I was trying to sleep.

As I slowly returned to consciousness and opened my eyes, I saw a family of whales.

"What the—?"

I knew I didn't have anything like that in my bedroom. It took only a second longer for my surprise to break into realization.

The sheets around me were blue. The pillows were navy blue and the walls had cool blue stripes on them. As my eyes swept around the room, my memories returned.

Now I remembered: I came to tour Asakura's hotel and then he had fallen asleep, and I'd followed suit.

"Thanks. Could you bring up some lunch, too? For two, yes. Thanks again."

I heard Asakura's voice and turned to look at him. He was sitting with his back to me, still dressed in his suit. He was talking on the phone on the bedside table.



He hung up and turned back around, as if he'd felt me looking at him.

"Ah, you're awake. I don't even remember falling asleep."

As far as I knew, Asakura wasn't a very expressive person, but he looked almost embarrassed as he spoke.

"What time is it?"

"Twelve-thirty. We slept for almost two hours."

I was shocked I'd fallen so deeply asleep.

"I bet you're hungry. And your clothes are dry now, so I asked the maid to bring them up with some lunch."

As soon as he said the word *lunch*, I felt my intense hunger. I'd overslept that morning and had only had time to eat a flavorless nutrition bar, so of course I was starving by now.

My stomach grumbled plaintively and Asakura smirked at the sound.

"It'll be a few more minutes. But here, you can have this."

Asakura dug around inside a pocket of his jacket until he found three cream candies, all wrapped in fancy paper. I had the same thought I'd had yesterday: *does he take this candy with him everywhere?*

"Thanks."

Suspicion swirled in my mind, but the nostalgic packaging called to me and I accepted one.

I pulled open the translucent paper and tossed the oval-shaped, cream-colored candy inside it into my mouth. A gentle sweetness filled my mouth with its familiar flavor.

"What's so funny?"

I was smiling to myself and Asakura inclined his head in curiosity, popping one of the candies into his own mouth.

"It's just been so long since I had one of these. I told you how I grew up at an old-fashioned inn, right? It was on a little island in the Inland Sea with about ten thousand people living on it. There are convenience stores and all kinds of development there now, but when I was little it was the middle of nowhere. There was only one store in walking distance. There wasn't much to choose from for candy. I think all they had were these cream candies and chocolate. I would beg my mother for them all the time, and I remember when she finally bought some for me."

"But didn't the inn bring in its own shipments from the mainland?" Asakura asked curiously. I knew exactly the kind of inn he was picturing: something with an older, no-nonsense woman in charge and lots of maids, a cook, and a full kitchen staff. I suppose something like that *was* more in line with the typical idea of an inn, but the one my family owned wasn't that impressive.

"It was an old inn on a tiny island. It was more like we rented spare rooms in the house than that we had a big, empty inn. My father would catch fish and then he and my mother would cook together. We got all our vegetables from a garden behind the house. And I had five younger siblings, so we were really packed in there. It was really something special to have something to yourself."

As the candy melted in my mouth, I kept talking,

remembering more and more.

"The little island is surrounded by ocean, the elementary and middle schools are in the same building, and there are more parents than students at the school festivals.

We had to go off the island for high school, but the boat was canceled whenever there was heavy fog, so we would be forced to miss school. The worst was missing the last boat back to the island at six o'clock, or when the boat couldn't go back out because the water was too rough, and we had to stay the night at teachers' houses.

I left home to go to college and then got this job. It has been more than two years since I've been back to the island."

"What a nice memory," Asakura murmured. He had listened to me in silence.

I looked up at him and our eyes locked. Was it just my imagination, or did he look somehow sad? Before I could look any further into that impression, Asakura turned quickly away.

We weren't friendly enough with each other that I could ask about something he obviously didn't want to talk about, so I didn't say anything. The conversation stumbled to a halt. Then we heard the doorbell ring.

"Here's that food you were waiting for."

Asakura got up from the bed, showing no sign of the expression I had glimpsed a moment ago. He walked to the door with long strides and I hurried to arrange my disheveled bathrobe. Presumably, all I'd done was put on a bathrobe while my clothes dried, but if the maid saw me looking so rumpled, I was sure she would find it odd.

I heard a muffled conversation and then the door clicked shut.

Asakura came back carrying a tray with our lunches on it and a plastic bag with my clothes inside.

"Just what you've been waiting for."

I didn't know if he was talking about the food or my clothes—or maybe both?

"Thank you...very much."

I decided to get dressed first, just so I would be able to relax. I took the bag from Asakura and turned around.

I picked up my underwear, which had been ironed. I found that bizarre, and pulled them on with a wry smile at the odd luxury. I shuffled into my jeans and T-shirt, then turned back around.

"I asked them to just throw something together for us. I hope you didn't have any special requests."

"Yeah, I'll eat anything."

Asakura set two plates of what looked like rice pilaf on the honey-colored table. Steam rose off of it—had they cooked it here at the hotel?

I was drooling. I wiped my lips and sat down in the wooden chair.

I pretended not to notice that Asakura was watching me indulgently, like someone feeding their pet.

Chapter Five

The white BMW stopped in front of my office's building.

I climbed out of the car and squinted back in at Asakura, who sat behind the wheel.

"Thank you for dropping me off. I'll start drawing up some sketches for the design and get back in touch the day after tomorrow."

"I can't wait."

I closed the door and stood on the sidewalk as the car slowly pulled away. Watching it drive away, I decided that it really didn't look like something an honest man would drive. If I were to pass it on the street, I would do my best to avoid looking at it.

I had only spent half a day with Asakura, but I felt incredibly tired already.

That's because I fell in the pool and Asakura molested me, I thought. It only made me feel more tired. I lifted my heavy feet and climbed the stairs to my office.

"I'm back!"

I opened the door as I spoke, but only Amamiya and Takagi, the office assistant, were there. Kawahara was probably downstairs in the studio, but where was Shino?

Sometimes we had to go out to meet with clients

or go to set things up in convention halls, so it wasn't unusual that we weren't always all in the office.

"Welcome back, Minami. Kasumi's out doing the window display of a cell phone shop in Shinjuku," Amamiya informed me graciously. My confused glancing around the room had apparently asked my question for me.

"She's so good at those. I saw the front window she did at that department store, the one with all the big, colorful parasols and the real water. It looked so refreshing. People were stopping on the street to look at it." In order to achieve this refreshing scene, she had used a small pump to make an artificial fountain. That kind of dynamic imagination was typical of Shino. It made me sad to think that it would be gone in a few weeks.

Shino was the only woman working for Tomato Design, but she definitely had the boldest designs. She always told me that if there were no challenges, things came together too easily to be any good. There was still a lot I had to learn.

"How was the tour?" Amamiya asked genially, waving me over to his desk.

I couldn't tell him the truth, that something depraved had happened and then I'd wound up taking a nap with Asakura.

"Uh...well..."

I didn't know what to say. Amamiya must have thought I was hesitant to answer for some other reason, because he said, "It's okay. Toru and I know what kind of hotels Mister Asakura runs. You don't need to worry

about how to break it to me."

My eyes widened at Amamiya's off-handed tone. How long had he known about that?

"Have you known this whole time?" If so, why hadn't they told me? Were they watching to see how I'd react?

My voice must have gotten a little sharp, because Amamiya looked up at me and waved his hands quickly. "No no, don't get the wrong idea. We talked about it when Mister Asakura came this morning. He told us he's not ashamed of what he does and that he never meant to hide it from us."

"Oh, I see."

That did sound a lot like Asakura.

As I thought more about it, I realized it wasn't the sort of information that should be hidden from Kawahara and Amamiya, since they represented the company.

I felt embarrassed for doubting Amamiya.

I was a little depressed. Amamiya turned in his chair to face me and crossed his legs. Then, with a playful look on his face, he asked me, "So what did you think? It's been a while since we've had a job with a place like that. I'm curious what they're like now. Are they still as weirdly elegant as they used to be?"

Was he asking this purely out of curiosity? I gazed at Amamiya and my mouth twitched into a smile. There was nothing compromised about his manly good looks.

"Well, I was surprised to find a pool inside the room. From the outside, it looked just like a regular hotel. They didn't post hourly rates, so you couldn't tell what it really was right away."

There hadn't been too much of this "elegance" at the Hotel Moon, which I'd visited yesterday, or at the Half Moon today, but there wasn't any clinging sense of guilt, either. Stylistically, they hadn't made a very strong impression overall.

As Asakura had said, "sex isn't shameful, so be confident." None of his hotels felt degraded.

"Wow, a pool?"

"Each hotel has a certain image, I guess, or a theme. The one I saw yesterday was like a plain business hotel. Today's had a water theme. Apparently the other one uses green. Asakura told me one of the rooms is so full of potted plants it's like a jungle."

"How cool. I wonder who did the designs." Amamiya tilted his head, muttering to himself about who could have done work like that.

This was one of the hazards of our job. I was susceptible to it myself. As soon as we saw anything unique, we would immediately get sidetracked wondering who had designed it.

"I took some pictures with the digital camera. Do you want to see?"

"Oh, sure."

"I'll print them out."

I got the little camera out of my shoulder bag. I had pictures of yesterday's hotel (which were all of Asakura's room, but he said the other rooms were just like it, so I suppose it counted) and I had snapped a few quick pictures before leaving the hotel today after lunch. I'd rushed through my shots today, without any time to check the results and I realized that I hadn't had

time to check any of them, but I was used to using this camera so I was sure all the shots had come out. Even so, I decided to look through the pictures on the camera before hooking it up to the printer, as some might have turned out crooked. At least I had the camera set on auto-focus, so even though I was no good with electronics, the shots wouldn't be blurry.

I went back to my desk and turned on my printer.

I looked down at the camera's preview screen.

"Good, all the shots of the room yesterday came out...what's this?"

I was looking at something I didn't remember taking a picture of. The screen was only one tenth of the size, but I could still clearly make out the color of skin.

I had a really bad feeling about this. No—it couldn't be.

I tried to wipe out the terrible thought that rose in my mind, but stare as I might, the image on the camera never went away. The picture was clearly of me—without a stitch of clothing on me, after the tryst.

I knew from the color of the sheets that it was Asakura's room. He must have taken these R-rated photos of me while I was out of it.

Killing him wouldn't even be enough for this.

My hands shook visibly and I had trouble holding onto the camera. I set it down on my desk and cradled my head in my hands.

"That bastard—!" I muttered under my breath, grinding my teeth and yanking at my hair.

I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Minami? What's wrong?"

"N-nothing! Sorry, it's going to be another few minutes!"

Amamiya was peering over my shoulder, but I snatched the camera up. If he saw these pictures, my head might just explode with shame.

"I just couldn't believe how badly I screwed up some of the pictures."

I tried to explain away my behavior with something innocent.

"Is that all?" Amamiya laughed.

I nodded quickly and forced myself to laugh with him. *Please believe that...*

"Toru's even worse with electronics than you are, so don't worry. What I can't understand is how he manages to use CAD just fine, but can't work out an addition problem with a calculator."

"But that wasn't because he was bad with electronics, was it? I thought he just had such thick fingers that he couldn't hit the small keys on a calculator without hitting all the others at the same time." I remembered how much trouble he had had with the tiny buttons on his cell phone when he needed to add a new number to his address book. I was pretty sure, for the same reason, that Kawahara hardly ever used his phone.

Since Amamiya must have known all that but still insisted on saying Kawahara didn't know how to use electronics, I knew he was just teasing. Kawahara would never get upset at Amamiya for it, after all.

Unfortunately, as I was thinking all this, I saw a long arm reach past my head for the camera. "I don't care how bad they are, though. Let's see them."

He swiped the camera from me.

"Ah! No! N—!" I shouted in terrified surprise. I reached out to grab it back, but I was too late.

"What's this—?"

Amamiya's wide-eyed stare jumped between me and the camera. He was looking straight at the screen.

Oh god, he saw it!

My hand fell limply, stretched out to take the camera back.

I hated myself for not deleting the picture as soon as I'd discovered it. I could have sat in shock just as easily after everything was erased. Even if my mind was a complete blank, shouldn't I have thought of doing that? I was such an idiot.

"Minami..."

"Yes, sir!"

Amamiya's voice was quiet and expressionless, but I stood up straighter.

My heart was racing, wondering what he was going to say to me.

"I don't want to badmouth your interests, but don't you think you could have been more careful with this?"

I felt cold sweat on my back at this mild reproof. Did he think I liked to take naked pictures of myself for fun? What a horrible misunderstanding!

"It—it's not what it looks like!"

I wanted to tell him I didn't do things like that. I was so desperate that tears were gathering in my eyes.

"Then what is it?"

"Uh—um..."

I got raped and I guess he took this picture while

I was unconscious.

I couldn't exactly say that.

My eyes scoured the office, and I caught sight of Takagi. I'd forgotten about him. Amamiya and I weren't alone.

Noticing my gaze, Amamiya turned around. "Takagi? You can go home early today. Have a good afternoon!"

Takagi looked surprised, but he got up from his desk. I'm sure he didn't mean to eavesdrop, but being in the same small room with us, he couldn't help but hear what we'd been saying. He might have picked up on the uncomfortable atmosphere and been eager to make himself scarce. "I'll see you tomorrow, then."

After getting his things together quickly, Takagi left the office. Amamiya and I were alone.

Amamiya pulled his rolling chair over, looking as if anticipating a serious talk. He sat down silently next to me. I didn't have the willpower to take the camera back; I couldn't stop Amamiya from going through the pictures.

After scrolling through the rest of the camera, Amamiya looked up at me and said, doubtfully, more as if verifying the truth of what he said with me, "You couldn't have taken this photo by yourself, even with the timer. And all the other photos are of a hotel room."

He probably knew everything: what hotel it was and who was taking the pictures.

"I don't care if you're sleeping with other men, or even transsexuals. But if you have to work with someone and they're making you do things you don't want to do,

that's not all right."

Asakura glanced at me then, wondering if he'd guessed right.

Making you do things you don't want to do—it was more like outright forcing me to do it. Those tepid words didn't fully express the situation.

I bit into my lip and said nothing.

That was all the answer Amamiya needed, apparently. His attitude grew cold and harsh.

"I knew Asakura was a little strange, but I didn't know he was like that. It's fine, Minami. We're canceling this job. Don't worry about the fee. But before all that... I'm going to go beat his face in!"

"Wh—? No! Mister Amamiya!"

Amamiya had a deadly look on his face as he surged toward the door. I chased after him and caught him in my arms. He looked like he really would find Asakura and attack him. He was usually so aloof. I couldn't believe how agitated he got when he was angry.

"Please, calm down; Mister Amamiya!"

"Why are you trying to stop me, Minami? Didn't that bastard @&#! you? I bet he even @&#!ed you!! I'm going to get even for that!" Amamiya roared, using words not suitable for polite company. I was completely amazed at how he acted when he was angry.

He was incredibly strong and even though I held onto him, he was still moving toward the door, dragging me with him. He yanked the door open.

If I let Amamiya go when he was in a mood like this, things would get bad. I was worried not just for

Asakura, but for the innocent bystanders who might get caught in their fight. I had to stop him somehow—but I could feel him fighting free of my grip.

I held on for dear life. Amamiya's stream of abuse only grew worse.

"Let go, Minami! I'm going to beat that stinking @&#! a new face!"

It hurt to see such a beautiful face twisted by these ugly words. This thought flitted through my mind, a little beside the point, but this was hardly the time for it. It was my fault Amamiya was so enraged, so I couldn't just watch him storm off to beat someone up.

"Hold on! Asakura didn't really—I mean... anyway, it's not worth losing the contract over."

As I spoke, I asked myself why I was protecting Asakura, but the words came out of me without any thought.

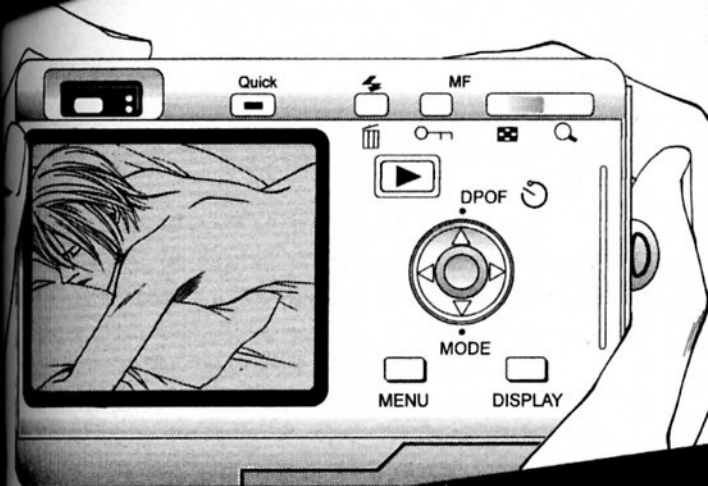
"Oh, I see," Amamiya mumbled, deflated. All the rage had left his body. I watched him suspiciously. He had been on the verge of murder, and now he was acting completely differently.

"I was about to do something really stupid. You're just confused, aren't you, Minami?"

"Uh—what do you mean?" Just confused? I was definitely confused about what he was talking about.

"Well, it's not really my place to say anything. If you really hated Asakura, I would break the contract. But you say I don't need to do that. So what does that imply to you?"

Amamiya smiled and his eyes met mine, but how could I answer? I wanted to know what it meant, too. I



was so confused that I couldn't say anything. Amamiya just smirked and combed his mussed hair back into place with his fingers.

"If you don't want to reject the job with Asakura, Toru and I will support you. He's making a hotel, right? If you need a little table or some other furniture, just give us a holler."

I didn't understand what Amamiya was getting at, but I did understand that he was offering his support.

"Th-thank you."

I bowed quickly, struggling to contain my joy at the wonderful boss I had been blessed with.

Chapter Six

I must be a real moron, I thought as I gazed blankly up at the light green ceiling.

"Minami."

"Mm—"

A handsome face drew nearer and pressed his lips against mine.

I hadn't been paying attention, so my guard was down and his tongue thrust between my lips. In the same moment, I tasted a milky sweetness. Even after Asakura pulled away, the lump of sweet cream remained in my mouth. Yet another piece of candy...

"Even if we go out, the only things open are going to be ramen stands and bars. Do you want me to make something? I'm not really in the mood for a microwave dinner."

I was hungry, it was true, but I didn't know what time it was. I twisted around on the bed and reached for Asakura's arm to look at his watch.

"What time is it?"

"A little past midnight."

I looked at his watch as he spoke. An incredible sense of fatigue descended on me. I was glad it was Friday so it wouldn't affect anything tomorrow, but I couldn't believe how late it was.

It had all begun just as work was ending—a little

after five that afternoon.

Amamiya answered the phone, then waved me over with a bemused expression.

"It's Asakura."

My heart began pounding wildly as soon as I heard Asakura's name.

I took a deep breath, then took the phone off hold.

"Thank you for holding—this is Kasuga!"

I didn't mean to do it, but my voice was much more excited than necessary.

I heard Asakura chuckle on the other end of the line. But he quickly reverted to his professional tone. His low voice flowed through the telephone.

"I'm near your office and was wondering if you wanted to go see the last hotel. We could stop for dinner on the way."

It would have been easy to refuse, but when I thought of being unable to chew him out about the picture on the digital camera, and considering my block on design ideas, it didn't seem like such a bad idea to go see the hotel.

Maybe along the way I would show Asakura my designs for "harmony."

"All right."

"I'll be there in ten minutes," he said simply and hung up.

I stared at the phone for a few seconds. If he didn't overwhelm me, nothing strange would happen. I would complain about the photo, take some quick pictures of the room, and there'd be no reason to stay any longer. I would just go straight home.

I'm not going to let Asakura get me this time! I looked up with conviction and my eyes met Amamiya's.

"Going out?"

It wasn't a question—he knew.

"Yes. For a-another tour."

"If you have dinner, you can charge it to the company."

It felt like there was something more he wanted to say, but I decided it would be unrelated to tonight and just nodded and replaced the phone. The files were backed up on my laptop, but I printed them out and slipped the pictures into a folder to be safe.

I finished wrapping things up and, my voice filled with trepidation, announced that I was leaving first even though I was the lowest-ranking grunt.

As I left the building, I saw the white BMW already waiting for me.

Passersby were giving Asakura's car a wide berth, moving to the far edge of the sidewalk, but it was true. It was undeniable that the car looked like the sort of thing an honest man would never drive.

"Hello, Minami."

Asakura poked his head out from the driver's side window. The wheel was on the opposite side in the car, so he had been able to spot me easily.

"Hi."

I gave a neutral greeting and Asakura motioned for me to get into the car. I waited for a break in the traffic, then hurried around to the passenger's side and climbed in.

"I wanted to thank you for that lovely photo you left on my digital camera yesterday." I spoke with heavy sarcasm and Asakura laughed.

I had suspected that he wouldn't pick up on my sarcasm, but for it to just roll off his shoulders like that infuriated me.

"So you found it? Don't you think you looked beautiful?" he asked, the perfect incarnation of audacity. I bunched my fists on my knees, trembling.

I wanted to hit him, but if I did, I would hurt myself, too. I considered hitting him with my bag instead, since it was nice and heavy with my computer inside.

"Digital cameras and printers have been getting better and better lately. With some of the new systems, you can print your photos out as soon as you take them." Asakura just went blithely on, apparently unaware of my trembling anger.

Huh? I was busy fighting back my fury and wasn't listening closely—what had Asakura just said? I replayed his words in my mind and realized a terrifying possibility.

"You—you didn't actually print it—?"

I remembered that in the first hotel room, Asakura's own bedroom, there had been a brand new computer and printer. I was terrified. I couldn't be sure

that he hadn't actually taken the photo and printed it out right then. Was the man *that* evil?

As I grew pale from my fearful imaginings, Asakura slowly pulled into traffic and continued nonchalantly. "Don't worry, no one else will see it. I just want to look at it and appreciate it sometimes."

"You—you pervert!"

"That's not very nice."

I have a somewhat stunted vocabulary, so I only managed a weak insult. I struggled to think of something more cutting to say.

Instead, Asakura's rapturous words cut into me. "You were just so adorable after you let me do all those things to you; I had to take a picture. You let me spread your legs, and put my fingers in you—you let me do everything I wanted."

If the seatbelt hadn't held me back, I would have thrown myself out of the moving car. That's how much shame and outrage I felt. Since I had been completely out of it while he'd done those things, I didn't know what it had been like, but not knowing was terrifying.

"But surely you don't need a photo for company, Mister Asakura? And I'm sure a picture of me isn't worth much at all. Please, just burn it!"

I was willing to bribe Asakura for it. I couldn't live like with the knowledge that a photo like that existed of me.

"If I get tired of it, sure."

"Then I'll burn it myself," I muttered in exhaustion, since I knew he never would. We stopped talking after that and I watched the world roll by outside

the window. Usually, in the closed space of a car, I would feel uncomfortable being alone with someone else and not talking, but I felt none of that now, and simply stared out the window.

The Full Moon was outside the city, just like the Half Moon had been. Green was much more predominant there than I had expected.

There were, of course, potted plants here and there around the front desk and in the halls leading to the guest rooms, but then I was led to the room with the most plants, and it was like standing in the middle of a real jungle.

"This is amazing. It must be hard taking care of all these plants," I observed practically, without thinking. Someone as lazy as me would kill all of this in no time.

"I lease the plants, so it's not a problem. Once a week, a professional comes to take care of them. And once a month, they're transferred to new pots."

"Huh." I didn't know you could lease plants. I could just go back home and be surrounded by a disgusting abundance of greenery if I wanted and not have to go to all the trouble of paying to rent plants.

The room was full of fresh greenery. The sofa and bedspread were a dark brown. A cork-colored carpet covered the floor. The room was centered around soothing earth tones. There must have been a ton of alpha waves or negative ions in the air, because the room

was simply bursting with a sense of relaxation.

"But I've been wondering, who designed these hotels for you? If you don't mind my asking."

I was a little late, but since I was asking a business-related question I decided to be polite.

"Yuta and I come up with the basic ideas, then we consult with a designer," Asakura tossed off an easy answer, rubbing the leaf of a large pachira tree.

My eyes widened. Is that what they were doing with me? After I'd been beating my head against a wall for a week after receiving Asakura's request?

"Then could you give me some of your basic ideas? 'Harmony' is a little too vague, don't you think? I'm having trouble getting started."

"No, this time we decided to leave it all up to you, Minami." My request for input was immediately denied.

I was glad they were willing to trust me, but I would have preferred something a little more concrete to draw inspiration from.

"Well, I've had some ideas. Take a look."

I took several sheets of paper out of my bag, the images I had printed at the office. There was one overall view and several shots from different angles.

Asakura gazed at the images seriously. Something about the intensity of his stare made me nervous.

"This is awful."

Asakura let out a long sigh and shoved the pictures back at me.

"Would you rather look at the models? I have my computer with me!"

"No, there's no need. I've seen quite enough."

He didn't need to see the better quality images to decide that this was unusable.

It was just a preliminary sketch, so I didn't expect to get it one hundred percent approved. I wasn't that cocky, but I wasn't expecting that strong a rejection, either.

"What don't you like about it? You have to be more specific or I can't change it."

If I let him just toss my ideas aside with a sneer, then what were all my days of suffering worth? I asked myself angrily. I took a step closer and Asakura looked down at me expressionlessly.

"It's not a bad way to arrange a room. It would be fine for an inn or a restaurant that's trying to look classically 'Japanese'," Asakura said coolly, holding my head in both hands. "But what I asked you for is not a traditional inn. I'm going to put it simply: I need a place where people can have sex. Look at this room. And you remember the other rooms you saw? Compare those to what you drew here. What's the difference?"

Asakura was more serious than I'd ever seen him before. He was staring at me, his eyes glinting. The other rooms I saw—and this room. What was the difference between them and my idea?

He probably didn't mean anything obvious like the dominant theme. It had to be something more fundamental. I scoured every corner of my brain and I had no idea. I grit my teeth against my bitterness and asked for help. "Please tell me, sir. I don't know."

Asakura nodded grandly and started to explain.

"First off, don't you think a tatami room like you want would be a bad idea? Not everyone's going to be nice and have sex on the bed. As the manager, I see tatami and I think about the cost of replacing it every time someone has sex. I can't allow it."

"Oh."

He had a point. The tatami was more appropriate for an inn.

I had made an equation in my head, where tatami expressed harmony, and I suspected I had been too simplistic, but the problem Asakura mentioned had never occurred to me at all. I felt like my eyes were opened.

"Like I said, the design itself isn't bad. There's something warm and comforting about it."

"Thank you." That was all I could say to his compliment, which ordinarily would have made me very happy.

I now realized that the floor here and the foam flooring at Half Moon were both very easy to clean. Asakura had gone to all the trouble of giving me a tour, and I had seen all these things firsthand, but I had never understood what I was seeing. That was a major failure for a creator.

I could push some of the responsibility for that onto Asakura, though, since he had switched from professionalism to animal lust halfway through the tours. I felt dejected. Asakura's hands, still gripping my head, combed through my hair.

"There there. You can show me your weaknesses," he whispered with a smirk, slowly bringing his lips to my own.

Uh-oh. If I didn't get out of there, it would all happen again. I sensed the danger, but my arms and legs were like lead and refused to move.

"Oh, what's wrong? Are you that sad?"

Asakura punctuated his words with several of the barest kisses. How could his kisses always be so tender?

"Hey in there—I'm coming in, okay?"

Even when his tongue dove into my mouth and intensified the kisses, my body refused to move the way I wanted it to. It didn't actively respond to Asakura, but it didn't resist, either.

The cream candy melted in my mouth until it was only the size of a grain of rice.

I had burned a lot of energy without eating or drinking anything, so that explained why I felt so tired.

"We could order pizza, too. What do you want to do?"

"I don't really want to eat pizza in the middle of the night."

Maybe there were menus in the room. I rolled over on the bed and picked up one for pizza and one for snacks.

Aren't you acting pretty cozy? This terrifying thought ran through my mind and I lightly touched both hands to my head. This was getting bad.

"All the kitchen staff will be gone since it's so late.

All that's left on the menu is frozen stuff." Asakura was lying on the bed next to me, pointing at the notice stuck to the side of the menu.

Just then, I heard a click from the door.

Was that...the sound of the lock? I thought, and the moment the thought crossed my mind, the door swung open.

"Time to get up, sir!"

It was Asakura's assistant Fujikawa, coming into the room with a strangely cheerful shout. I hadn't seen him since we first met at the very first hotel, so why did this have to be the place where I ran into him again?

"Oh my god! I'm so sorry! I thought you were alone, sir."

As soon as Fujikawa saw Asakura and me lying next to each other in the bed, he spun back around.

"Is there something urgent that brings you barging into my room?"

Pulling the blanket up over my head, Asakura got out of bed and pulled his clothes on.

"Yes, sir. There's something you should see in the security office."

"Again? The last time it happened was at this hotel, too, wasn't it?"

Asakura and Fujikawa's voices grew distant as they talked, as if they were walking away. I waited until I heard the door shut, then jumped out of the bed.

I couldn't believe it. How could he be so calm after getting caught like that? Asakura and Fujikawa both!

I fished my clothes out from under the bed and pulled my underwear and shirt on with a crazed speed.

Before bothering to button my shirt, I pulled my jeans on and started fussing with my clothes when I heard a knock on the door.

"Uh—come in!"

I quickly zipped my jeans up.

Is Asakura back already? I wondered, but no.

"Is it safe to come in?"

Fujikawa pushed the door open hesitantly. The person I least wanted to see.

"Good evening, Mister Kasuga. I'm sorry about what just happened. I thought Mister Asakura was asleep, so I barged in and—"

"No—no, it's fine."

"Can we sit down? I brought you something to eat." He held up a brown paper bag.

Honestly, I wanted to leave as soon as I could. How could this guy be so placid after catching his boss in bed with another man, completely naked? He must be used to catching Asakura in bed with men and women all the time.

Fujikawa gestured at the sofa with a friendly smile, and I couldn't just say "no way, I'm going home." I had to sit down on the dark brown sofa.

"First things first. Your food."

He opened the bag and set a latte and a wrapped-up sandwich on the table.

"Thank you," I said awkwardly. My throat felt so tight, I doubted I would be able to eat, so I stuck a straw in the latte and began to drink. There was an uncomfortable silence.

"I really am sorry."

I nearly choked on my latte. I started coughing violently.

"A-are you all right?!"

"Uh—yes. Yes, I'm fine."

I took a calming breath and looked back up. Fujikawa's childlike face was dark with concern.

"The woman at the front desk told me that Mister Asakura was in here, so I just thought he was asleep. The front desk shift had changed, so I guess they neglected to mention that he was with someone."

"Ah. Sorry."

Even if they had told Fujikawa that Asakura was with me, he probably would have assumed I'd already gone home. I'd been here for almost six hours now. My head burned. I must have been bright red, from my face to the back of my ears. I fanned myself with one hand.

Fujikawa made it sound like Asakura always slept in his hotel rooms. Not just for his trysts, but just to go to sleep, too.

He seemed to be debating if this was the right time to mention something, but he didn't seem the type who could keep quiet, so he went on. "I was surprised, actually. Mister Asakura never stays in bed with people once everything is over."

That was all that had surprised him? He may have looked like a child, but this guy definitely belonged with Asakura. That was not a normal reaction. I think most people would be a little more surprised to find out that their boss was gay, or that he was sleeping with someone from work.

"No, uh—we just fell asleep. I don't think he

meant to be clingy.”

Fujikawa had seen it all, so if I denied that anything had happened, it would be an obvious lie. Still, I felt stupid to be making excuses like this.

I had started out mumbling, and my voice got lower and lower as I spoke.

“You...were sleeping?” he asked, with something like surprise in his voice. I was in turn surprised that something so mild would shock him.

“Um, yes.”

If he was going to be surprised anyway, why couldn't he be surprised to have found Asakura and me naked in bed together?

“I-I guess Mister Asakura just works himself very hard. There was another time he fell asleep, holding onto me like a pillow. I guess he didn't get much sleep that night. It was a bit stressful.”

“Another time?! Today isn't the only time he's done this?”

Fujikawa lunged forward on the sofa, and I got the feeling I'd only made things worse. Saying that was as good as revealing that Asakura had overpowered me more than once. How could I be revealing everything myself?

I pulled away slightly at Fujikawa's incredible enthusiasm. Fujikawa caught himself and straightened up again.

“Excuse me. I just found that so interesting. Actually, I believe Mister Asakura has a mild form of insomnia. He can't sleep when he's all alone, but when there's someone else in bed with him, he can only sleep

lightly. That's why he likes to sleep in hotels, where there are always people in the rooms next door or in the hallways. But that's also why, as far as I know, this is the first time he's ever slept with a lover. You must be very special, Mister Kasuga.”

Fujikawa must have misunderstood something I'd said. I found myself repeating the word “special” in a doubtful voice.

“Special? I don't think so.”

I'd never gotten that feeling from Asakura. I was just one of many partners—his casual sex harem.

After I'd shot down Fujikawa's suggestion, he came back with a fervent argument. “How can you say that? You *are* special. No, I think it's more than that. I think it's love. I'm sure of it.”

The way he said the word “love” reminded me of something. I searched my memory.

It was Asakura. When he'd come to the office the morning after our first time together, he'd blurted out something similar as a bad joke. They came off completely differently, but there was something similar about these two men. Being Asakura's assistant no doubt meant that Fujikawa knew all of his secrets. In a relationship like that, even opposites would start to become similar.

A chilling thought occurred to me. How could Asakura, who had no standards, keep his hands off of Fujikawa, who was so close to him, and cute to boot?

I took a careful look at Fujikawa, sitting next to me on the couch, but couldn't imagine Asakura bedding him. Somehow, he looked and acted so much like a child

that just thinking about it felt almost like a crime. How old was he, anyway? I really couldn't tell just by looking at him. Was this what it meant to be ageless?

"Mister Kasuga?"

"Sorry! What?" Fujikawa's voice caught me by surprise. I felt guilty for imagining such dirty things about him.

"Mister Asakura is a very awkward person, so he might seem selfish, but actually he's just lonely and spoiled. He's like a child. I think it must be very difficult to be with a person like that, so I wish you the best of luck," Fujikawa said, putting his hands on his knees and bowing his head formally. That drove me crazy.

"Hold on a minute! I'm not in any kind of serious relationship with Mister Asakura! I don't need any luck!" I hurried to clear up Fujikawa's misunderstanding.

Fujikawa raised his head slowly to look up at me.

"Really?" He looked, and sounded, devastated.

What was so sad about the fact that Asakura and I weren't in a serious relationship?

"But—you *are* with him, aren't you?"

"Well, uh—that's complicated," I said hesitantly, and Fujikawa plowed ahead.

"I'm sure you couldn't do something like that with someone you didn't like! I don't know if he realizes it yet, but I'm sure Mister Asakura feels something special for you, Mister Kasuga!"

I was sure there must be relationships in the world that existed solely for the pursuit of mutual pleasure, where the way people felt about each other didn't matter. I even believed that if Asakura's body was in the

mood, he would go along with it without any emotional response. I never thought that I was like that myself, but the fact that I let Asakura seduce me said something. At least until I met Asakura, I had believed, like Fujikawa, that you had to like someone for a physical relationship to develop.

Then, how did I feel towards Asakura?

I didn't hate him, but now that I'd been asked if I liked him, I wasn't sure. It almost seemed like my heart had been pulled along in the seduction of my body. I didn't know what to think anymore. When I tried to consider the question, my thoughts just fell into a muddle.

There was a single, heavy knock on the door and it opened.

"I found what was messing up the monitors. Someone must have tampered with the camera in the elevator so they could do some groping play. I wish they'd stick to their rooms," Asakura muttered as he came in. When I saw him, my heart leapt into my throat instantly.

What was going on? It was pounding like a drum.

"Again? The last time it was someone doing a strip tease in the elevator."

As Fujikawa spoke, I jumped up from the sofa.

"Mister Kasuga?"

"Minami? What's wrong?"

The both looked at me strangely. I didn't think I could keep my cool if I spoke.

In a panic, I grabbed my bag with my laptop in it and bowed my head quickly.

"Please excuse me—I'm going to head home." I tried to slip past Asakura.

"Minami? Wait! I can drive you back." Asakura grabbed my arm, and my entire body tensed.

Holding my head, not truly understanding the reason for this panic myself, I knew I didn't want to be alone with Asakura, but my arm was slightly warm where he touched it. I couldn't shake him off.

"That's okay. I can still catch a train."

"How do you plan to get to the station? Do you know the way?"

I choked. He was right—the last train probably hadn't left yet, but since I'd come here in Asakura's car, I didn't know how to get to the nearest station.

"At least let me take you to the station."

I couldn't think of a reason to plausibly refuse his offer. We walked out of the room together, Asakura still holding my arm.

Even sitting in the spacious seat of the BMW, my conversation with Fujikawa rattled around in my head. Whenever Asakura said something to me, I could only give the briefest answers.

"You're quiet tonight. Did something happen with Yuta while I was gone?"

Of course Asakura had noticed my odd behavior. He pulled to a stop in front of the nearly empty station and looked me straight in the eyes. Light from the street lamps shone into the car, lighting Asakura's face oddly. It hurt me to admit it, but he did look good.

"No, nothing. Thank you for dropping me off."

I was suddenly afraid Asakura's face might



hypnotize me. I glanced back to make sure no cars were coming, then opened my door.

"Minami."

Asakura said my name in a low voice and caught my wrist with his long fingers. My shoulder jerked tight.

"I'll be in touch."

We were doing a job together, so that was only to be expected, but somehow when he said it, the words were filled with sex appeal, caressing across my ear.

"See you." He held my head and brushed his lips across mine before I could escape.

"What are you doing?!"

I shook Asakura's hand off and climbed out into the road. I wiped my lips off with the back of my hand. I meant to glare at him, but my face turned bright red instead.

My brain was boiling, but when Asakura chuckled and tossed off a casual "goodnight," I felt my temperature slide back down. That sort of contact was probably no more than a run-of-the-mill prank for Asakura. I was the only one who was so thrown off by it.

"Goodbye!"

I slammed the door shut as hard as I could and ran into the station.

Asakura could touch me so easily, and I reacted so strongly. Where did those feelings come from? I was afraid to find out and tried hard not to think about it.

Chapter Seven

Every time the phone in the office rang, my body tensed.

It had been ten days since I'd run away from the Full Moon hotel, and I hadn't seen Asakura in all that time. He had called two or three times, but every time I avoided him by saying the designs weren't ready yet or that I had a prior engagement.

I was afraid to see him.

What if he figured out my feelings, which I was trying to avoid looking at myself? The very thought made me want to avoid him forever, but soon I wouldn't be able to run anymore. People would notice if I kept turning down Asakura's invitations. Besides, I had to show him my designs.

If Asakura was calling now, I decided, I would screw up my nerves and accept his invitation. I surreptitiously watched Amamiya pick up the phone, this vow in my heart. He looked up suddenly and our eyes met.

"Minami?" He put the call on hold and waved at me. "It's Mister Asakura."

The sound of the man's name set my heart racing. I thought I had prepared myself for this, but now that the moment had come, my anxiety immobilized me.

I walked stiffly over to Amamiya's desk and

picked up the phone.

"Thank you for holding. This is Kasuga." I spoke slowly, trying hard to make sure my voice didn't shake. I heard Asakura's low voice in answer.

"Hi, it's Asakura. I was hoping to see some firmer design ideas soon. Do you have them ready?" He was in his professional mode.

I had anticipated this part of the conversation, so I gave my prepared response.

"Yes. I've almost finished the plans. If you'd like, I can e-mail the files to you as an attachment."

I just wanted to get through this and see him as little as possible. Asakura must have sensed that, because he refused my suggestion.

"Actually, could I get you to bring them to Hotel Moon? I'd like to give you my feedback directly. Can they spare you at the office for a little while?"

He wouldn't let me get away. That's what I heard in his words.

"All right. When would you like me to come over?"

"Anytime is fine with me. You can come when you're done there. I'll be in my room, like before. I'm not feeling too well, so I might be asleep, but you can just come in." He was sick? His voice sounded fine.

"Okay. I'll see you this afternoon."

We said goodbye and he hung up. I stared at the phone for a long moment, listening to the dial tone.

"Minami? Are you all right?" Amamiya asked hesitantly.

"Oh—yes, I'm fine. Don't worry!" I answered

with quick energy and hung up the phone.

Yeah. Everything is fine. Listening to Asakura's voice had aggravated me, and now I had to go see him in a few hours, that was all.

My heart felt heavy, but I decided to go over the designs one more time before I went to see Asakura.

I let out a short sigh and went back to my desk. I stared at the screen of my computer. Throwing myself into the designs, I chased Asakura from my thoughts for a little while.

"I'm off! I'm going to go straight home afterwards."

"Have a good afternoon. I think you did a great job. Mister Asakura's going to love it."

"Thank you." I nodded appreciatively to Amamiya's encouragement and left the office.

In my shoulder bag I carried the design file, which I'd gone over with Amamiya and Kawahara to make sure I'd gotten everything right.

In this, the final hotel that Asakura was building, each room would be huge—about 260 square feet according to the blueprints. There would be four floors. The first floor would have the front desk and the kitchen, office, and security room, like all the other hotels, but each floor would have only four rooms, meaning there would only be twelve rooms total.

I believed Asakura when he said that money was

not a consideration and this time focused much more on the idea of the room.

The first thing I'd done was change the tatami matting for wooden floors. In order to keep it from looking too Western, I placed large woven reed mats around the room. That way, no matter how dirty they got, they could be easily replaced.

I put sliding screens on the windows. I made the wooden frames smaller than usual, so that damaged sections could be repaired more easily. I put straw and twisted paper behind the thin Japanese paper of the windows to dampen the light further and give the rooms only the haziest lighting. Obviously at night there would be no natural light, so I put a lamp between the screen and the window. For the light fixtures inside the room, I put a hanging lamp on the ceiling and two more traditional-looking wooden lanterns on the bedside tables. Lastly, for the room's sofa and table, I recycled old materials. By using the hundred year-old beams we took out when remodeling an old home, I could make wooden furniture with an indescribable warmth and flavor. Taking the others up on their promise to help me, I'd asked Kawahara to design those pieces for me.

It wasn't a perfect expression of Japanese "harmony," but instead, I thought, a skillful mixture of Western elements like the floor with more Japanese touches. Obviously, if Asakura said he didn't like it, I would make whatever changes he felt were necessary since it was his project, but this time at least I had a little more confidence that he wouldn't just toss the sketches aside.

I walked out of the station and headed for the hotel, where we would meet for the second time. The doors slid open for me and I saw two middle-aged women behind the front desk. I remembered seeing one of them before.

"Hello. I'm Kasuga. I'm here for—"

I began introducing myself hesitantly, and one of them answered immediately. "Yes, we've been expecting you. Go on in."

They smiled at me. I abandoned my introduction and passed the desk. If someone I knew saw me now, they might think I went to love hotels all the time. I went all the way down to the end of the hallway and stood before Asakura's room.

This is where he first raped you, I thought, bringing complex emotions to the surface.

"Oh, wait."

Just as I was about to knock, I remembered that Asakura had told me he wasn't feeling good, and so he might be asleep. Maybe I was dropping by a little late, but there was no excuse for being asleep when a business associate was coming over.

I shook my head in annoyance. I was pretty sure that I had woken him up at our very first meeting. Asakura was far outside the bounds of common sense, and I couldn't say what he might do.

"Maybe if I'm ve-e-ery quiet."

He had told me it was okay to just come in, but I didn't feel comfortable just opening the door without any warning. I knocked quietly on the door, almost guiltily, and gently turned the handle.

"Hello? I'm here." I peeked into the room speaking quietly.

"Oh!"

Our eyes met, but it wasn't Asakura—it was Fujikawa.

I was frozen, my hand on the doorknob and one foot inside the room.

Fujikawa was sitting on the sofa that faced the door, and Asakura's head was in his lap. His tie was loose and the first two buttons of his shirt were undone.

It was an oddly charming scene. I couldn't take my eyes off Asakura.

"Hello, Mister Kasuga. Sir! Wake up! Mister Kasuga is here."

His smile was as carefree as ever, but I couldn't answer.

"Sir! Wake up!"

"Hmm?"

Fujikawa shook his shoulder and Asakura finally groaned, stirring sluggishly.

"Why'd you wake me up, Yuta?"

"There's no time to be groggy, sir. Mister Kasuga is here!"

He spoke kindly, but since Asakura had wrapped his arms around Fujikawa's waist, Fujikawa was pounding him on the shoulder, trying to wake him up. I didn't know why, but my mind was completely blank.

"If this is a bad time, I can come back later. I'll just leave my sketches here."

"No, wait, Mister Kasuga!"

I could hear Fujikawa calling to me, but I just took



the prints of my designs out of my bag and set them on the floor, then closed the door and walked back down the hall.

I was impatient even pausing for the automatic doors to slide open. As I stepped outside, my steps naturally turned into a run.

Why was I so upset? I wondered, but then I remembered what I had just seen.

Fujikawa had told me that Asakura was an insomniac, that he couldn't sleep when there were other people there—and now he was cuddling up beside him for a nap! He'd told me I was special, but I was nothing!

My mind was in chaos. I jumped into the train at the platform just before the doors closed. A recording played on the train's speakers, asking passengers not to run at trains as they were leaving. There was nothing I could do inside the train but stand stock still and slowly bring my breath, and my thoughts with it, under control. I felt like I had been stabbed through the heart, down to the truth I had been trying to avoid. Seeing Fujikawa coddle Asakura like that had upset me. If I didn't care about them, it might have surprised me—but never upset me.

Was it like Fujikawa had suggested? Did I have special feelings for Asakura?

"No way. Hah!"

The shock of facing the truth made me laugh, hanging from one of the subway car's straps. The old woman sitting across from me looked at me like I was crazy. I had to be quiet inside the train.

Chapter Eight

By the time I got back to my apartment, I was completely worn out. I was sure it was from all the emotional turmoil. I locked the door reflexively as the door closed and kicked my shoes off by the door. I went down the short hallway to my living room.

"What was I thinking falling for a guy like that?" I muttered to no one, in my tiny one bedroom apartment.

I fell for him.

Just saying those words aloud had eased some sort of burden in my heart.

"Why him, of all people?"

If I was going to be homosexual, why couldn't I like Kawahara or Amamiya? Why was it this man, who could tell me he slept with a hundred people every week and I wouldn't even bat an eye? I smiled bitterly at my bad taste.

I plopped down onto the warm floor and thought about Asakura.

I want Asakura.

I faced the feelings that I had been running from, but I felt like I would never see reality again.

My mind was a complete muddle. I wanted to think about all this calmly, but my hands were shaking.

"I-I did that—with Asakura—"

It was a little late to be ashamed of what had

happened, but now that I realized I liked him, I thought back to the time that he had overpowered me and I'd been eagerly seduced. I had to express the humiliation I felt somehow.

I tried to grit my teeth, but they only clattered. I bit down hard on the thumb of my right hand, and eventually my teeth stopped shaking.

I asked myself how I could have done a thing like that.

It might not have meant anything to Asakura, but it had to me.

The image of Fujikawa cradling Asakura's head in his lap rose once more before my eyes. I wanted him. My heart, thrilling with the sweet joy of self-realization, was chilled by the image.

Had Fujikawa touched his hands, too?

Thinking back, I realized that Fujikawa had known an awful lot about Asakura. He had known things about him that I hadn't realized myself—and then he tried to tell me that I was special? I couldn't figure out what Fujikawa was trying to do. Asakura had never thought about anything but Fujikawa. I was an idiot for getting on this emotional roller coaster of my own free will. It wasn't funny at all, but the thought made me want to laugh. Really, it was just because my face was pulled so tight.

I knew what Asakura was like. If I told him how I felt, I knew what his answer would be: "Great! Want to have sex then?" but I didn't care how often we had slept together. I knew I could never monopolize his heart. He was so frank about being open-minded and unashamed,

I was sure he had left a trail of broken hearts in his wake. Would it be enough for my name to just be at the top of that list?

I felt stupid for being unable to answer my own question. I dropped my face toward the floor and let out a deep sigh. I felt a warm drop slide down my face and strike the floor. Had I begun to cry without even realizing it? Surprised, I put my hands over my eyes. No, this was running into my eyes, making them burn.

"Am I sweating? It must be too hot."

I touched my forehead and my fingertips came away wet with sweat. I only then realized how hot the room was. Apparently the chaos of my thoughts had numbed my senses. The room had been shut up all day, so now it was chokingly stuffy. I turned the air conditioner on and opened the window in the living room. Until the air conditioning started to work, I would sit out on my tiny balcony in the breeze.

It was after six on an August evening. There was still sunlight outside my window and a heavy reminder of the heat of midday still lingered. Thankfully, my room was on the fifth floor, so at least the radiated heat from the asphalt didn't reach me.

"A white BMW?"

I gazed blankly down at the street below me and watched a white BMW with tinted windows park in front of my building. It wasn't anything obvious, but there was something about the car that made it seem like something a normal person would never drive.

I knew one person who would drive a car like that, but he had no way of finding his way here and he had no

reason to come, anyway. Still, I couldn't take my eyes off the white BMW.

"If it's not him in that car, it's someone worse," I whispered deliberately, trying to mask the wild pounding of my heart in my ears. As I watched, the driver's side door opened. The first thing I saw was a long leg, then a head and an arm. The arm and leg were so long, the person had to be very tall.

A man climbed out and stood on the sidewalk, looking up at my building.

"A-Asa—!"

I almost called out to him, but I clapped both hands over my mouth and huddled down on the balcony.

He didn't see me, did he? But what's Asakura doing here?

My heart thudded intensely. I took several deep breaths to calm myself down, then nervously peeked over the edge of the balcony. The car was still there, but Asakura was gone.

"Oh man. What was I thinking?"

I ruffled my hair with one hand. Just then, I heard the intercom in my room buzz.

I jerked up in shock and stiffened. Just as my heart was beginning to calm back down, it had leapt back into full speed.

From the timing of it, it seemed like it had to be Asakura, but maybe by some wild chance, in all of Tokyo, one of Asakura's friends lived here. That was almost too incredible to believe, so he had to be there to see me. I remained frozen and the bell sounded again, urgently.

Slowly I crawled back into the room and closed the window. I cautiously approached the door, not making a noise, getting closer to look out through the peephole.

"Minami!"

There was no way he could have seen me, but Asakura just had that kind of irritating timing. So it really was Asakura! I could tell without seeing him, just from the sound of his voice.

What could I do? My mind was filled with that single question. I had only just confirmed my feelings for him, and now suddenly I would see him. I didn't think I could stay calm.

"Hey, Minami! I saw you on the balcony! I know you're in there."

I could hear how impatient he was for me to open the door.

If my neighbors called the manager because he was making so much noise in the hallway, that would be bad. If someone called the police, that would be worse. I unlocked the door silently and slo-o-owly opened it.

"About time."

His long fingers curled around the door, his low voice following, and he forced the door open. He was wearing the same loosened necktie, the same wrinkled shirt—there was no mistaking that this was Asakura, just as I had seen him barely an hour before.

"Get out of the way."

He barged in, not asking "can I come in," but forcing me out of the way as he walked into my apartment. It was so like him. He strode into my living room and I hurried after him in surprise.

"What are you doing here, Mister Asakura? And how did you—?"

He plopped down on my floor as if he owned the place, and my question came out hesitantly. I couldn't believe that Asakura was here.

"I asked your office for your address."

"But they wouldn't just give it to you—!" My address was personal information. My office wouldn't just hand it out to anyone who asked for it. Kawahara and Amamiya were both very strict about that kind of thing.

"You didn't threaten them, did you?" I asked, frightened by the images I had in my mind of Asakura holding a knife to Amamiya's throat. His eyes glared up at me sharply.

"Don't be stupid. Odds are, a guy like that would attack me if I did that. I told them everything. I said I was coming here to seduce you, but I needed your address and they gave it to me."

"Really?" I frowned. Asakura suddenly reached out and grabbed my wrist. "Hey!"

He yanked on it, hard, and I fell against his chest. I didn't know what had happened.

I was in shock, but pressed against his chest, I heard the powerful thumping of his heart. The reality of the fact that Asakura was holding me with his arms pressed in around me.

"Mister Asakura! Please—could you...let me go?"

My face was starting to burn. If Asakura looked at me now, he would see how very red I was. Just moments

ago, I was struggling with the realization that I'd fallen for him. Even if he meant this physical contact as a joke, I was too embarrassed to play along.

"No," he said with an odd finality, tightening his arms around my body.

Blood rushed into my head.

He's just mocking me for being embarrassed! I thought, bitterness beginning to mix with my humiliation.

"I said, let me go! I love you, Mister Asakura! If you keep clinging to me like that, it's going to break my heart! Are you going to take responsibility for that?" I shouted, reaching the end of my rope. I struggled in Asakura's grip and his arms fell away suddenly, no longer able to hold onto me.

I planned to use that opening to run to the other corner of the room, but he caught my arm immediately and I fell flat on the floor. Asakura pressed down on my arms and legs. I couldn't move a muscle.

"I'll take responsibility for anything you want, so just be quiet and hear me out."

I got control of my breathing, ragged from struggling, and glared up at Asakura. He looked down at me. Why was I glaring at the man I loved with such savage bitterness? I felt desolate as soon as I realized what I was doing.

"Fine."

Asakura released my arms from his grip. His expression changed, then. How can I describe it? It was like a wild dog becoming docile. He was no longer bristling, on edge.

"So you love me? Then it's mutual. I said I was coming over here to seduce you, right? You're special to me, Minami. I wasn't kidding when I said this was love, that day in the office. I can't sleep without you beside me, Minami."

His passionate words excited me, filling my heart with glowing warmth. I didn't know how much of what he said was true, and I almost felt sorry for myself, letting myself get excited so easily.

I can't sleep without you beside me, Minami. Those words sent my heart racing. Then I remembered what had forced me to face my feelings in the first place.

"Liar! You were sleeping just fine in Fujikawa's lap!"

He'd had his arms wrapped around Fujikawa's waist so tenderly, clinging to him and calling his name. They were perfect for each other, like an old couple who'd been together so long that everything they did together was oddly natural.

Mister Asakura is a very awkward person. He's lonely and spoiled, Fujikawa had told me, like he knew everything about him. There was nothing between us, and if Asakura was just going to tell these transparent lies, then I couldn't believe him no matter what he said.

If Fujikawa was his favorite, then what was I? His lover? His concubine? If his heart was going to belong to another and he would only give me his body, I would rather not be with him than be in such a pathetic position.

"Yeah. And that made you run home? Yuta is—well, he's special in a different way than you are,"

Asakura chuckled, squeezing my hands.

So I really was in second place. Who knows? Maybe even third or fourth place.

"He's my precious, beloved...only brother."

"Huh?"

Brother? *Brother?! What was Asakura saying?* For a moment, I couldn't process it. The meaning slowly penetrated my brain and I stared at Asakura suspiciously.

"Do you think I'm an idiot? How can you tell such transparent lies? You two look nothing alike! And you have different names! Who calls their brother 'sir'?"

I was working myself up into a rage, but Asakura only watched me placidly.

"I said, hear me out."

He pressed his lips against mine, as if to shut me up, but I fought back, turning my face away. I wasn't going to make it *that* easy!

"If you don't believe me, we can do a DNA test. The reason we don't look alike is because we had different fathers. And our names are different because he took his wife's name. As for what he calls me, you've never seen us in private. He calls me 'sir' during work to be professional."

"H-his wife?!"

My voice was shrill with surprise. This was probably the single most shocking thing that Asakura had said. Fujikawa looked so young—I would almost be tempted to say he was in high school—and he had a wife?

"She's an only child, so they adopted him into the

family to carry on the name. They have three kids, you know...Is it that surprising?"

Asakura raised an eyebrow at me as I lay there, frozen. I was completely floored.

I was surprised by the fact that Asakura and Fujikawa were brothers, and by the fact that Fujikawa, who looked like a child, was married—and that he had three kids!

I really had no idea what to think anymore.

"I sleep really well with Yuta, but the first time I ever slept that well with someone else was with you. I'm not just guessing here. I think every part of me wants to be with you. Body and soul." Asakura gazed down at me passionately as he spoke, but I was more flustered than I was overjoyed. Asakura's hands around my wrists felt so warm.

"Minami—"

His breath caressed my lips, his lips following with a light touch. My hands tightened reflexively, but the tension slowly left my body.

"Mm—"

His tongue dove into my mouth, gently stimulating the roof of my mouth. I squirmed at the ticklish feeling.

"Mister Asakura, please—let go of my hands."

Asakura's face darkened at that. He must have thought I was going to try and escape.

"I'm not going to run. But I can't hold you if you're pressing me down so hard."

I caught his eyes and begged him to let me go so that I could put my arms around him. He looked at me doubtfully, but loosened his grip, unpinning my arms

from the floor.

"I was telling the truth."

I didn't know if it was strange or adorable how suspicious he was being. I wrapped my arms tightly around him, chuckling.

"Minami—" Asakura breathed my name, his chest heaving, hugging me against his body with all his strength, though it ended up being more like me pulling him down. Our heartbeats pulsed against each other.

Is this my heartbeat, I wondered, or Asakura's?

"There's one other thing I wanted to ask you—"

Asakura was tugging at my shirt, sliding his hand under it to find my skin. I knew that this was going to turn steamy very quickly and tapped Asakura's shoulder.

"Can't you ask me afterwards?" Asakura murmured below my ear, as if to tell me he was busy with more important things.

"Ah—"

My back twitched off of the floor and my hands paused in their resistance and slid around his body. Goosebumps prickled my skin as his warm hands moved across my belly and chest.

"Nngh—ah!"

My throat arched upwards and Asakura's wet tongue slid across the skin. Every part of Asakura that touched me was warm—his breath, his hands, and his tongue. Passion flowed from those places that he touched me and began to break down my barriers.

"Nn—wait. Wait. There's a—a button there."

I stopped Asakura as he tried to pull my shirt off over my head. He had only half unbuttoned the shirt.

He undid the remaining ones and I pulled my shirt off, wriggling on the floor to get it off.

Asakura was acting unusually rushed. All the other times, it had been as if Asakura were teasing me, watching how eager I became from a cool distance, but now his eagerness made me happy. It told me, without need for words, that I wasn't the only one in heaven.

I was embarrassed to be the only one without any clothes, so I reached up to Asakura's necktie. I'd never taken off someone else's necktie before, so I was very bad at it.

"I don't like being all alone like this. Hold still."

"Hey! That made it tighter. Be careful."

While Asakura laughed at my clumsiness, somehow I managed to pull the tie off and dropped it to the floor. *Now for the shirt.*

"I need my hands."

"I know, I know."

I couldn't stop my hands from shaking as they unbuttoned Asakura's shirt. I was so embarrassed I felt like I would turn around and run if Asakura mentioned the fact that I was trembling, so of course he said something especially cruel.

"You're really not very good at this, are you?" He smiled and I glowered up at him through my eyelashes.

"Yeah, well you smell like an old man," I answered, keeping my shocked voice under control, but my face was burning. For all I knew, my entire body was red with embarrassment.

"You're so slow. That's enough."

Putting a stop to my fumbling, Asakura quickly



pulled the half-unbuttoned shirt up over his head. He looked down at me, half naked, and I looked quickly away, my shame finally taking control. What could I do? My heart was pounding like crazy.

I looked at Asakura's naked body and he looked at mine, and even though this wasn't our first time together, my heart was racing at full speed despite my efforts to calm down. A week ago, I never would have thought the day would come when I would be looking at a man's naked body, blushing like a schoolgirl.

"The bottom, too?"

Asakura was unbuttoning my jeans without a word. I caught his hand.

"If you want to do anything else, yes." He sounded a little surprised.

"I guess you're right," I replied hesitantly. "But give me a second to get ready."

"What do you need to get ready for? I love you, and you love me. What's the problem?"

"There's no problem, I just...I—ah!" I hedged, trying to buy time, but Asakura just opened the front of my jeans and stuck his hand inside them. I cut myself off with a cry. I could feel his warmth even through my underwear.

Asakura's hand was in no hurry. He touched me lightly, nudging me forward.

"Nngh—"

The warmth in my body slowly began to concentrate there. Asakura's fingers traced out my shape and my hips twitched toward him.

"You're so hard."

"Nngh—no! Don't touch me—"

I reached out to stop him, but Asakura grabbed my wrists. He teased me so insistently that I already felt like I might come.

Asakura bent forward to press his lips to my ear as they twisted into a smile. "I can feel how wet you are. You're so dirty."

I heard a wet slapping noise from somewhere very close. In that same moment, I felt a wet tongue trace the shape of my ear.

"Y-you're the perverted one, Mister Asakura!"

I knew he was saying these things on purpose to humiliate me. I'm sure my eyes were utterly unconvincing, as wet as they were with tears, but I glared defiantly up at him. He faced my gaze and laughed.

"You're right. You're so cute, Minami. I want to make you blush and cry even more. I want to strip you of every last rational thought you're clinging to. I want to see you be dirty."

Asakura's low voice pronounced his desires with deliberate care.

"Wh—what?"

Don't let his evil words sway you! I commanded my aching heart.

"Ah! No! Not that!"

Seizing my moment of hesitation, Asakura tore my jeans and underwear off in one sweep. I freed my feet from them, and he threw them into the corner. He grabbed my knees and pushed them apart, then placed himself between my legs to keep me from closing them again. I had nothing to hide behind. Everything was

open to Asakura's gaze.

"I knew it—you're wet. Look at all this."

"Ah!"

Asakura drew a circle around the tip of my shaft with his fingertips, spreading the fluid over me. My body tensed and I shut my eyes tightly. Hot breaths pulsed between my slightly open lips.

"You're being so docile. You're such a good boy."

I heard Asakura smirk and then suddenly felt something warm and wet close around my shaft.

"Ah! Ungh!"

I snapped my eyes open and saw Asakura's head between my legs. I raised myself up on my elbows, trying to stop him, but he was sucking all the strength from my body. My head thudded back onto the floor. The sensation of Asakura's mouth on me was so powerful that I didn't even feel the pain.

"Agh! Nngh!!"

I tried not to make any noise, but it rose out of me by itself, my voice flowing out of me with an unbelievable sensuality.

"Mm—Mister Asakura, it's—it's too—!"

I squirmed, trying to tell him that it was too much, but Asakura kept licking me without a word. A wave rose up from deep within me and I felt myself on the brink of being swept away any number of times. I grit my teeth, fighting against it.

"Mm!"

My mind was painted white. I felt like I had been thrown into a void. My hips leapt from the ground, tiny

twitches coursing across my stomach.

This was bad...I was going to—

"No, Asakura! You have to—stop! Nngh! No!"

I felt myself on the crest of the wave and I begged him to stop, but Asakura took me deep into his throat. My pleasure only increased. Breathing roughly, I struggled to get myself under control.

"Ah—!"

I don't know if he did it on purpose or it was an accident, but I felt Asakura's teeth scrape over my shaft. My body trembled mutely.

Asakura's tongue enveloped me.

"D-did you—?"

I squeezed Asakura's head in my hands, choking on tears as I begged to know if he'd swallowed. Asakura looked up at me and casually flicked his tongue over his lips.

"Yeah," he nodded, simply.

I couldn't believe it. Had he really—with *that*? I sucked in a deep breath, popping my sinuses painfully, and I started to cry.

"Why are you crying? It felt good, didn't it?"

"B-but, you—"

My throat closed. I could barely speak. All my frenzied emotions seemed to flow out of me in my tears. I took several deep breaths and somehow got myself under control enough to speak.

"I-I have to do that, too, right?"

I couldn't let him do everything. That would be wrong.

I wanted Asakura to lose control, too.

This thought prompted me to reach out to his crotch, but when I was nearly touching it, he stopped me.

"Next time. Now's not a good time."

"But why? I don't want you to do everything." I bit my lip, unable to comprehend why he'd stopped me.

"No, it's just—"

This was the first time I had seen Asakura look so conflicted. He mumbled, "I don't know. It just doesn't seem like a good idea. I'd feel so stupid if I came as soon as you touched me."

In the end, he spit the words out in a stream, just to get them out.

I gazed into Asakura's eyes earnestly. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He patted my cheek lightly and smiled.

"Just...because you said that."

"Did you think I never got excited? You're wrong about that, I can assure you."

He probably could. I was always out of control and I had thought that Asakura always stayed cool.

Tilting his head slightly, Asakura pressed his rueful smile against my lips.

"I'd like that. But I'm too excited right now to stay in control."

Our bodies pressed together and I could feel Asakura's manhood against my skin, despite the fact that he was still almost fully dressed.

Feeling his desire pressing frankly against me, my cooled passion began to slowly return to my body.

"Nngh—"

Our tongues rolled over each other, our passionate sighs mingling. Each time we pulled away, there was a wet sucking sound.

He tastes so good. I ran my fingers over his spine, hugging his broad back. Asakura's body tensed.

"Be careful."

He licked the edge of my moistened lips, then sat up and bent my knees.

"I think you know by now, but you can't tense up."

He gazed down at me as I lay on the floor, then ran his tongue over his finger elaborately, covering it in saliva as I watched.

I didn't know what he was going to do with it—but I was too shy to ask. I couldn't look directly at him, so I rested an arm across my eyes, blocking out my vision.

I gasped as his wet finger pushed gently against me, then burrowed slowly inside.

He'd told me not to tense up, but my body stiffened naturally. Asakura stopped moving his finger.

"Try focusing on this instead."

"Ah—nngh!"

His other hand was swirling over my legs, exploring.

I was as weak as ever to the direct stimulation he gave me. Passion swarmed into that spot as my muscles relaxed. I could feel myself getting harder, and Asakura's finger began moving again.

"Ungh! Ah!" His long finger was all the way inside me.

As soon as I realized that, it slipped back out.

When he'd pulled so far back that only one joint remained inside, he squeezed back in.

Considering he had just told me that he couldn't control himself, he was pushing in and out of me very patiently, driving me closer to my limits. I preferred being consumed in a raging fire to being roasted over a low flame like this.

Suddenly, Asakura pulled my flesh apart and added another finger.

"Ah! Ungh."

My cry surprised me and I bit down quickly to silence it.

"I want to hear you," Asakura pouted.

I looked up at him, panting heavily. "The—the walls are thin here. Someone will hear!"

If someone had their TV turned up or had a loud conversation, the sound came through the walls perfectly. Just last week, one of my neighbors had had a fight with her boyfriend. I really didn't want to eavesdrop, but I couldn't help it. It was impossible to ignore. I didn't know if my neighbors were home yet, but if any of them heard me screaming like this, I would be mortified. I honestly think I would have to move out.

"Ah. Then should I keep you quiet?"

For a moment, I thought he was going to cover my mouth with his hand. Or maybe he was going to shove a handkerchief or towel in my mouth?

None of my guesses were right: Asakura "kept me quiet" with something much gentler than I'd imagined.

"Mm! Nngh."

He pressed his lips against mine, swallowing

my breaths as he pushed his finger in and out of me. Even without the stimulation, my body was heating up. Asakura pinned my leaping hips down with his body. His tongue swept through my mouth as his fingers explored me. The two motions became one until I didn't know what I was feeling anymore. When he released my lips, leaving me in a daze, he pulled his fingers out of me.

I heard the whisper of falling fabric. I didn't have the strength to raise my head, so I couldn't see what was happening but I suspected that Asakura was taking off the last of his clothes.

He held both my knees and bent in half to kiss me once again.

I couldn't even tell him how much it hurt to be in this position. I rested my hands on Asakura's shoulders as he bent over me. As soon as he thrust against me, my body filled with a robust weight. My thoughts scattered in a million directions.

"Agh!"

If Asakura's lips hadn't been pressed to my own, I would have screamed.

I had slept with Asakura a few times already, but it was much harder this time. It felt like he was a different size.

I turned my face to one side to escape the kiss, then stared up at Asakura, my eyes filled with tears as I panted desperately. "It feels—bigger!"

The muscles in my stomach tensed naturally as I spoke and I could feel myself squeezing Asakura's shaft, deep inside my body. He grimaced slightly, then let out a slow breath. He brushed my sweaty hair off of my face.

"Sorry. I told you I couldn't hold back. I'm really sorry. I'm going to move now."

Without giving me any time to respond, Asakura whispered *sorry* and started to rock against me. He wasn't thrusting violently, but pushing against our deep connection. I felt him forcing it deeper and deeper, approaching my limit.

"Ah! O-ow! No, it—it hurts!"

The part of me that held him didn't hurt, exactly. It was more of an ache. I couldn't feel very much. But being pounded against the hard floor and feeling my naked skin sliding across it hurt a lot. My shoulders and spine were banging audibly into the floor.

"What hurts?"

"My—my back! It hurts!"

I dug my nails into Asakura's shoulders, crying about the pain. He murmured a quiet acknowledgment and said, "That makes sense. Hold on to me."

"Nngh—ah!!"

I clung to Asakura desperately and saw the world swing around. With his shaft still inside me, Asakura had brought me up to sit on his knees. The angle of penetration changed and I felt my weight forcing him deeper inside.

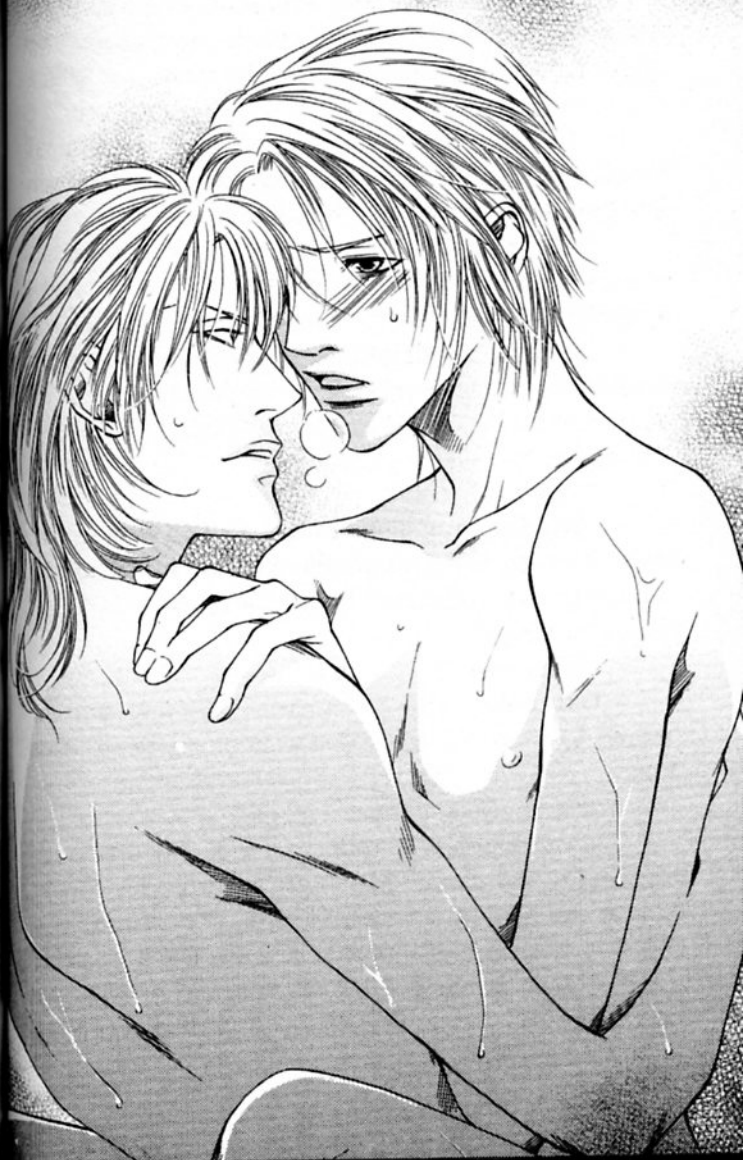
I clung to Asakura with trembling hands, panting heavily.

"That's better, isn't it?"

"Yeah...but it's still hard."

Asakura had been stroking my back, but now his hands stopped.

"Hard? I feel something hard, too."



He grabbed my hips, pulling our bodies closer. There was, of course, no way to hide my erection from him. I couldn't deny his teasing accusation.

"Ah! Unngh!"

My hands on Asakura's shoulders, I tried to pull away. His hands instantly held my hips more securely and he pounded his body upwards, into mine.

"Ah!! Nngh!"

I hurried to cover my mouth with my hand, trying to stifle my erotic cries.

My passion swirled inside my body, searching for a release, burning everything in its path to cinders. At some point, I had begun to rock my body very slightly, too, matching Asakura's rhythm.

"Mm."

Covering my mouth wasn't enough to keep my voice in check and I bit into the knuckle of my thumb. My body was dominated by such obscene lust that it didn't even hurt.

"Minami—!"

Our pulses slowly increased, whiting out our minds. I was afraid that if this went on my heart might burst.

"Nn-no! Something is—nngh!"

Something warm rose up inside my body and flew out of my mouth. My finger fell from my mouth, aching from the strength of my teeth. I begged to know what was happening to me. Asakura had taken his hands off my hips and was holding my hair, pressing my lips against his. His tongue was warm as it rolled over mine.

"Mm—ah!"

He sucked on my tongue, sending a horrible shudder down my spine. I could feel myself convulsing around Asakura's member.

"Mm!"

"Ah! Ungh!"

I clung to Asakura's shoulders as I broke the kiss. Our bodies shuddered, releasing the full force of our enthusiastic lust at nearly the same moment.

I went limp, but Asakura caught me as I began to fall backwards. He held me against him in silence until my ragged breathing calmed and my sweat dried.

Chapter Nine

We knew the tiny bathroom wasn't built for two, but we went in together anyway. We washed ourselves clean of sweat and everything else, bumping our elbows on the walls constantly. Unlike at Asakura's hotels, where all the luxuries were provided, I didn't have anything fancy like a bathrobe at my apartment, so we wrapped towels around our waists and went back to the living room.

Coming back to the room now, it looked like some kind of disaster had blown through. Clothes were scattered everywhere. I knew they were going to wrinkle. I didn't care if my T-shirt or jeans got messed up, but Asakura's shirt and his pants especially were in more danger.

"It might be too late now, but don't you think we should hang those up?"

I opened the closet and took out a hanger while I searched for sweatpants to use as pajamas. I was fine in a T-shirt and cotton shorts, but I wasn't sure I had anything Asakura could use. I dug out my biggest T-shirt and some baggy pants I didn't know I had and turned back around.

"You can try this on while I hang up your pants."

"Thanks."

I handed the clothes to Asakura and hung the pants

on the hanger. That left the shirt—but he probably had that dry-cleaned. I decided to hang it up with the pants for the time being and collected his necktie.

“Hm?”

When I spread his shirt open, a small, folded-up piece of paper fluttered out. I put the hanger back in the closet and crouched down on the floor.

“Something fell out of your pocket.”

“Oh—”

Asakura was tugging at his T-shirt, but stopped and kneeled in front of me.

It didn’t really matter, but I noticed that the pants that were too long on me came halfway up Asakura’s calves. I knew his legs were longer, but I didn’t know how to feel about such a huge difference.

“Oh, it’s my design.”

Unfolding the paper, I recognized the graphic of my design that I’d left on the floor of Asakura’s room at the hotel.

“What does this mean here, ‘reused material’?”

Asakura squinted at something in the list of notes.

I’d had my knees against my chest, but stretched them out now and sat across from Asakura on the floor.

“That’s referring to the beams we took out of an old house when we remodeled it. It’s cedar and beech wood. It was standing for a hundred years, so it’s got a really great flavor to it. The beams are from rooms with a fireplace, so they’re all stained black by soot. They’re really gorgeous.”

Asakura nodded with interest as I explained.

“Wow. How cool,” he murmured earnestly.

I realized I’d managed to hook Asakura’s interest and that encouraged me.

“Then I wanted to put a wooden screen between the door and the bed. I think a folding screen would be the best option. No matter how often you go to places like that, I think it’s a little jarring to open the door and be able to see the bed. Don’t you think? Women are sensitive to those kinds of things.”

“Huh—I didn’t know that.”

“And I think there should be open carvings on the top part of the screens, but...”

I trailed off in a mumble, glancing up at Asakura. He was frowning at me, I guess because I stopped talking.

“But? Is there a problem with that?”

“Well, everything I’m telling you right now is just what I think would look good, in an ideal setting. If you implemented all of it, it would cost a fortune, so I can’t really recommend that you do all of it.” In the end, it wouldn’t be just one room. If we obsessed over details in all fifteen rooms, it would be too much work. That was my humble opinion, but Asakura flippantly countered it.

“That’s not a problem. Didn’t I tell you that money’s no object and that you could design whatever you wanted? I don’t care how much it costs. Let’s just move forward with the image you have here.”

He gazed at the design. I had never thought about it before, but now I started to wonder how much the owners of love hotels made. Or were Asakura and

Fujikawa's parents rich? I knew it wasn't a polite topic to ask about, but now it was bothering me.

"Is your family rich, Mister Asakura?" I asked hesitantly.

Asakura looked back at me expressionlessly. He wasn't surprised or angry—his gaze was completely empty.

"Well..."

I wondered if I shouldn't have asked. I was about to tell him to forget I'd even asked when he finally gave a reedy answer.

"They were actually nearly poverty-level. Do you want to hear about it?"

Our eyes met. If I looked away now, I felt as if I would never be able to ask about this again. I nodded. As I shifted my position on the floor, I felt my towel.

"Oh! Just a second."

I just realized that Asakura was dressed and I was sitting across from him with a towel still wrapped around me. I pulled my T-shirt and shorts on as fast as I could and sat back down.

Asakura waved for me to come closer. I sat between his legs and he wrapped his long arms around me. It wasn't like being hugged—it was like leaning against a giant stuffed animal. I felt completely accepted.

"This is the first time I've told anyone this story. I don't know if I can make it all the way through," he said

from behind me, warning me that it wouldn't be pretty. Then he slowly began his story.

"My mom sold herself to men to make a living. Ever since I can remember, that's what she did."

My body stiffened unconsciously. I knew Asakura would be able to feel the change, but he just kept speaking.

"We lived in a slum apartment. At night she would leave me with the old lady next door, but when the old lady became crippled, my mom took me out with her. I think about it sometimes and I wonder if it was better to take her two or three year-old kid to the hotels with her or to leave me alone in the apartment. It's such a horrible choice to have to make."

"She took you with her? Into the rooms?"

A terrible thought occurred to me. Did she have her child in the room with her while she did stuff like that?

"Of course not. She left me with the women at the front desk. She almost always used the same hotel, so they knew each other. I sat at the desk without knowing what was going on, or slept in the break room, or went into the empty rooms to sleep."

He rested his chin on top of my head as he spoke. It was like his voice was booming down from above.

Wow.

Fujikawa had told me Asakura was a mild insomniac who couldn't sleep next to anyone, but he also couldn't sleep if he couldn't hear people nearby. His childhood must have made him that way.

"I always ate very late and my mom usually

couldn't give me sweets. But the woman at the front desk saved cream candies for me and would press them into my hand. That was the only reason I looked forward to going to the hotel. That's why, even at this age, I still like that candy."

So that was why Asakura nearly always had candy in his pockets. I remembered when I'd told him about bringing candy back for my brothers and sisters, he'd said it was a nice memory. I felt a lump in my throat.

"When I was four or five, I started to help out with little things around the hotel. That was when I realized that the people who used the hotel weren't all like my mom, who did it because she had to. Some of them liked it. When I inherited a building from my grandfather and had to decide what to do with it, I decided to make a hotel, since I knew them better than anything else. I think the reason I decided to make mine so bright and avoid being sleazy was because of the power of that memory.

"You have a grandfather? But you said Fujikawa was your only relative."

If Asakura had a grandfather, why did his mother need to sell her body to live?

I turned slightly to look back at Asakura, but as I started to turn, he caught my head in his hands and turned me back around.

"I only found out about my grandparents after my mother died. I was around seven. We didn't have enough money to go to the hospital, and she died giving birth to Yuta in our apartment."

"Oh my god..." It struck me as such a heroic story.

I was speechless. I felt a weight press against my back.

"We didn't have a phone, so I ran out to the public phone to call an ambulance, but I was too late. The police checked around and we found out that our grandparents were still alive. They took me and Yuta in when he was still a baby. When I was in high school my grandmother died, and then three years later my grandfather followed her. I remodeled the building my grandfather had owned and started my hotel while I was in college."

My body was trembling. I felt bad for being so affected just by hearing the story when Asakura was telling it so calmly.

"I owe them a lot for helping me go to college. I still don't know why they stopped speaking to my mother."

My gaze fell to the floor and Asakura ruffled my hair. I heard a harsh chuckle patter down onto my head.

"Don't get so depressed about ancient history, Minami. The first time I looked at your design, it reminded me of that old apartment I used to live in with my mom. Of course, your version was a lot nicer. But there was something about it that I liked. So it's easy to see how I would be charmed by the person who created such a sensitive place. I've slept with more people, men and women alike, than I can count. But I've never been able to fall asleep with anyone but Yuta and you. I sleep like a baby next to you," he sighed.

I touched Asakura's hands, which rested on my chest. They were warm. His body felt strangely warm, too.

"Are you sleepy, Mister Asakura?"

I thought that maybe his body temperature went up when he was tired, like a child. I turned slightly to look back at him and this time he didn't stop me.

"Hm? I guess. I haven't been sleeping well lately, not even with Yuta. I just can't sleep without you, Minami."

He squeezed me hard against him and I remembered what Fujikawa had said. *He's just lonely and spoiled, like a child.*

I had thought he knew so much about Asakura—but it was because they were brothers.

"If you want to go to sleep, we should get in bed."

Asakura was, little by little, getting heavier against my back. If he fell asleep while he was holding onto me, I wouldn't be able to move an inch. This thought motivated me and I pointed toward my bedroom.

"Okay. But you have to come, too."

"Ah! Hey!"

Asakura picked me up and carried me out of the living room. I was going to tell him he didn't have to carry me like that, but when I saw how happy he looked, I couldn't say anything.

I was too nice to him.

"You should move out of here, Minami."

"Huh? Why?"

He set me down on the bed, then lay down beside me completely naturally, his arms around me. It was impossible to try and fit two adult men in a tiny single bed. We would fall out if we so much as turned over.

"The walls are too thin. And you can't even fit a

double bed in this room."

It sounded like Asakura wanted to move in. When had he decided that?

I smacked Asakura's arms and muttered, "Now just a second! Are you thinking about coming to live with me, Mister Asakura? Don't you think that's a little sudden?"

"But I can't sleep without you, Minami. Are you telling me you don't care if I die from lack of sleep? Or are you going to come to the hotel every night?"

I tried to imagine myself going to a love hotel every night and blanched. How would I get to work in the mornings? It was ridiculous. I shook my head peevishly and Asakura smiled at me triumphantly.

"Then you have to move somewhere you can have a bigger bed. I'll pay the rent. And I'll move out of my room in the hotel."

Asakura was pushing things forward quickly. He cuddled closer to me, looking content. Would I have to spend the rest of my life sleeping next to this oversized kid? I felt uneasy about where this was going. I suspected I would be the one with insomnia now. Now was the moment to back out, but when I looked up at Asakura, I saw he was already asleep, a peaceful look on his face, and all my doubts disappeared.

His rhythmic breaths ruffled my hair.

Well, I was used to being a big brother, I guess. I couldn't just push him away when he needed help. I let out a little sigh of defeat and wrapped my arms around Asakura.

Making Plans

After a lot of arm-twisting from Asakura, Minami rented a two bedroom apartment exactly halfway between his design office and Hotel Moon.

It had barely been a month since the two confessed their feelings for each other.

"When are the movers coming?"

Minami stretched out his legs, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the towel he wore around his shoulders. At his feet were tightly secured cardboard boxes. After lunch, they had come to pack up Asakura's room at Hotel Moon, but it was in such disarray that they hadn't made much progress.

"Three, I think," Asakura answered, remembering the confirmation call they'd received the night before. Minami's eyes widened.

"But that's in less than one hour! We won't be ready in time."

"That depends on how hard we work," Asakura murmured with a hint of teasing in his voice. He didn't actually think that they would finish in time, either, but he knew that Minami would have an aneurysm if he didn't say something.

"It's your fault for putting this off until the last second! You even slept until noon this morning!" It looked like his half-hearted evasion of the problem had

upset Minami anyway.

Asakura saw his hands shaking as they held a roll of tape and he laid a gentle hand on Minami's shoulder. It was easy to be fooled by his mild exterior, but Minami was surprisingly short-tempered. He was stubborn, too, so his anger always lingered. Asakura rubbed Minami's tensed shoulders, trying to calm him down.

"Don't get so upset. If we don't finish in time, we can just take the rest over in the car. All we need the movers to do is take the big stuff."

In fact, there weren't many boxes in Asakura's room. He was going to leave enough behind to keep using it as an office, so they weren't taking the bulky sofas. His belongings ought to fit just fine in his car. They had decided that moving his TV, computer, and the rest of his office equipment would be too much for them and had called in movers for that.

"It's better not to take too much."

Minami was probably thinking about his own packing. He looked suddenly distracted. That had been a real job. Every box weighed a ton. Asakura had asked him what was inside, and Minami had told him it was almost all art books. He'd been collecting them since he was a student, so he had quite a few accumulated, all of them hardcover and loaded with color photos. There had been five or six boxes packed full of them.

The day after they'd moved them, Asakura's back hurt so much he couldn't sit down for too long at a time. That had really opened his eyes to how out of shape he was.

Minami took the handful of suits off the pipe in

the wall and put them in a box. Asakura's shirts were in a zip-up plastic bag, so they were going to take them like that, and then tape the drawers of his dresser shut.

Minami surveyed the work and inclined his head curiously. "Where are your clothes? Is this all?"

"Clothes are too much trouble, so I just buy what I need when the seasons change. That way they don't pile up."

"Unbelievable," Minami muttered in disbelief. He let out a deep sigh. He was sometimes surprised by Asakura's lack of economic sense, but if he thought about it the way Asakura did, as a way to minimize his effort, it seemed natural.

"Do you just throw people aside when you get tired of them, too? Would you do that to me?"

Minami was trying to act flippant, but his voice caught very slightly on the last word and pierced Asakura's heart. He spun around to look at Minami. He'd let himself run away with another wild idea.

"I've never been with anyone who stuck with me long enough to get on my nerves. Usually it was just one time, or we'd decide to see each other when we were both in the mood. I told you that you're special, Minami. This is the first time I've stayed with anyone and the first time I've been able to sleep next to anyone. How could I ever get tired of you?"

He made this declaration with uncharacteristic seriousness. Minami was the only one who mattered to him. When he saw Minami the very first time he'd come to the hotel for a meeting, Asakura hadn't been able to take his eyes off of him for a long time. He didn't really

believe in supernatural phenomena, but thinking back on it now, he supposed that had been love at first sight.

"Minami—"

Asakura reached out to Minami, who was still pouting, and pulled him close. He felt a momentary tension in his shoulders and then Minami sank into his arms without resistance.

"Yeah—I am special to you, aren't I? You can cheat on me, just...come back and sleep beside me."

"You think I would cheat on you?"

"You wouldn't?"

The plaintive way Minami said that revealed how little he still trusted Asakura.

Asakura smiled ruefully at him. Minami probably wouldn't trust him about that until Asakura showed him he was a man of his word. He didn't care what it took: he just wanted to possess Minami.

Since Asakura had followed that impulse and forced Minami into his bed at their first meeting, it was natural that Minami had trouble believing him. Really, it seemed almost miraculous that Minami had forgiven him at all. Asakura recognized that he was selfish and willful, like a child, but Minami had accepted him that way. Sometimes Asakura suspected that Minami was the one pulling the strings in the relationship.

"We're not done yet," Minami said, tapping Asakura on the back. He sounded like he was trying to encourage a child.

"Mm—you're right."

Asakura touched Minami's hair, enjoying the way it felt, and bent forward.

Just a little closer and their lips would touch...

A heavy knock came from the door.

"Hello in there! Have you finished packing? Oh!"

Yuta barged into the room and froze, seeing Asakura and Minami in each other's arms. They wondered whether he might be considerate and leave the room, but Yuta walked up and separated the two with a smile.

"You'll have time for that after the boxes are packed! First things first!"

Even when he interrupted his older brother and his boyfriend in an intimate moment, Yuta wasn't in the least perturbed. He had a carefree smile on his boyish face. Yuta couldn't have been any more different from Asakura if he tried.

As a child, he'd been a crybaby and had followed Asakura everywhere. As the younger brother, he should have been sheltered from life, but at some point he had grown up and become very grounded.

"I'm sorry." Minami jumped away from Asakura with an agitated look and searched for something else to look at. Asakura felt vaguely unfulfilled as the warmth he had felt in his arms disappeared. He glared at Yuta for his tactlessness, but there wasn't anything he could say. Yuta was right: they needed to pack first.

"I know it isn't your fault, Mister Kasuga. You don't need to apologize. I'm sure my brother coerced you."

"Don't talk like that, Yuta. He's not a child."

"I'm not sure I'd go that far!"

Yuta apparently felt comfortable enough around

Minami to rib Asakura in front of him.

He's got a lot of nerve, considering he's younger, Asakura thought immaturely. He crossed his arms and loomed over Yuta, who was much shorter, but of course that didn't scare him.

He was just about to add something when the door popped open and the woman from the front desk appeared, hesitantly poking her head in.

"Excuse me, sir. The movers are here—should I send them in?"

The three hurried to pack the last boxes and the movers delivered them efficiently to the new apartment. Yuta stayed to help them put the majority of the room in order, then went back home. Apparently he had promised to come home early today in order to put his kids to bed.

All that was left were the odds and ends in the cardboard boxes, so Asakura called an end to the work and left for the bedroom.

The apartment had two rooms, one 130 square feet and big enough for a big bed and another room of one hundred square feet, which was Minami's room. They'd put Minami's drafting table and many of his other large art tools in there, so it effectively became his. Asakura's computer stuff was in a corner of the living room, but since Yuta had moved the financial records and most of the documents for Hotel Moon into his office there, there

wasn't much that Asakura needed to use his computer for.

Asakura realized that they'd worked almost without stop since noon and suddenly felt very hungry. He poked his head back into the living room to ask, "Are you hungry, Minami?"

Minami was sitting in front of an unopened box.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know if this box is mine or yours. We set your things down right next to where mine were, so I'm not sure."

Asakura crouched beside Minami and scrutinized the box. If the box had been distinctive in any way, there wouldn't have been a problem, but this was a plain cardboard box they'd bought at a hardware store. Minami and Asakura had both used them. They ought to have used different-colored tape or written their names on the boxes or done something to differentiate them, but it was a little late for those ideas now.

"Well, let's open it and see. Is there something you don't want me to see?" Asakura asked with a teasing smile, peering at Minami.

Minami threw back a wide-eyed glance. "I thought you might. What if there's something I shouldn't see?"

Asakura thought back. He was pretty sure he'd thrown out everything he'd received from old lovers. He glanced back and saw Minami staring at him. Apparently his silence had pronounced him guilty.

"I swear, there's nothing! We can't tell what it is by staring at the box, so we might as well just open it."

They ripped the tape off and peered inside the box.

There wasn't much inside it, considering how big it was. There were a lot of folders and brown envelopes that been tossed in loose.

"I guess it's mine. Looks like some business stuff I meant to leave at the hotel."

They had rushed through the last of their work so they wouldn't keep the movers waiting and had just tossed whatever they found into boxes. The reason Asakura didn't remember bringing this stuff must have been because Yuta or Minami had packed it. He rummaged through the papers, catching the edge of an envelope and sending papers sliding in every direction.

"Oh—"

"Mister Asakura?"

Before Asakura could pull his hand back, Minami caught sight of what he'd uncovered in the box. He picked it up and asked, his voice dangerous, "What is *this*?"

"Oh, you know. It's my special photo." He looked down at the photo that Minami shoved at him and gave a forced explanation.

The photo showed Minami, lying in bed without a stitch of clothing on him, clearly recovering from their lovemaking. It was the picture he'd taken of Minami while he was asleep, after their first time together. Asakura thought he'd tucked it away safely where Minami would never see it, but he had underestimated him spectacularly. He tried to think of a good explanation, but Minami's hands were shaking. He could feel the temperature in the room dropping as the seconds ticked by.

"I'm going to burn it," Minami said simply.

He thrust his hand into the pocket of Asakura's shirt and found Asakura's lighter. He held its flame under the picture.

"Hey! Wait! That's dangerous. You'll set off the fire alarm—or start a fire!"

"I am *going* to burn this."

"Calm down first!"

Asakura caught Minami's wrists and stopped him. Minami's eyes were glazed. He looked determined to burn the photo right this second. Asakura was desperate, paying the penalty now for his crimes.

"Minami!"

He was so frenzied that their bodies tangled together and they rolled across the floor. Asakura picked himself up first and held Minami's wrists, pinning him to the floor.

"Let me go, Mister Asakura!"

"Not until you calm down."

Minami tried to twist away, but Asakura held him secure with his weight. Minami was losing his temper, refusing to settle down, so Asakura pressed their lips together. They were pressed together so tightly that he felt Minami's body convulse and tense.

"Mmf!"

He refused to let Minami go, rolling his tongue around his mouth and slowly stroking him. Asakura knew all of his weaknesses and the fight slowly seeped out of him.

Now he could release Minami's hands and he would stay on the floor.

"Did you think you could lie about this?"

Minami looked up at Asakura with tear-stained eyes and Asakura slowly shook his head.

"I didn't mean to. If it upsets you that much, we can burn it later. But in the sink this time."

Minami's eyes widened at how easily Asakura gave in. He looked like he didn't believe what he was hearing.

"What, you don't believe me?" Asakura asked dejectedly.

Minami opened his mouth to say something, but in the end he said nothing and just shook his head.

Asakura smiled slowly, still bent over Minami.

"I really will get rid of this. But in exchange, I want you to agree to pose for new ones."

"Wh-what?"

Minami, his eyes still wide, didn't seem to understand what Asakura had just asked him to do. His eyes swept over Asakura, still skittish.

Asakura didn't miss his obvious opportunity. Without wasting a moment, he rolled Minami's shirt up and swept his hand across his bare skin.

"Ah!"

Minami's arms twitched as he gasped quietly. Then, as if a spell had been broken, he jerked away.

"Hold on, Mister Asakura. I'm never going to agree to that! St-stop that! Ah!"

Asakura stroked Minami's chest with one hand while he lightly massaged Minami's thighs with the other. Goosebumps prickled Minami's skin. Asakura felt them.

It wasn't only shame that gave him goosebumps. The shaft that pressed against Asakura's thighs was proof of that.

"Nn-no! Don't touch me there!"

Maybe Minami really did want to resist, but there was hardly any strength in it.

"You know that old saying; you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar? I'm going to make you agree to let me take photos of you, Minami."

"I won't! Ngh—M-Mister Asakura!"

Asakura toyed with Minami's chest as he rubbed their groins together. He sealed Minami's mouth with a kiss. He played skillfully around inside his mouth and Minami's initial resistance now drew Asakura closer.

It won't be much fun to take pictures after everything's over. Maybe I can get permission to take the pictures during sex, Asakura thought excitedly as he pulled Minami's clothes off. He pressed an occasional kiss against Minami's lips to keep him from coming back to his senses and looked for the digital camera.

Postscript

Hello, or I suppose “nice to meet you.” I’m Hikaru Masaki.

This is a story about love hotels. I’ve written a lot of pretty racy stuff for Aqua, like a story about the owner of a swingers’ club and one about a perverted pediatrician. I’m very grateful that they indulge me so much.

I want to thank Ms. Minase for her terrifyingly sexy drawings. I’m sorry they have to be used with my childish scribbling! Thank you so much! I was so thrilled talking to my manager about them. “They’re so *naughty*.” “Yeah, they really are! (laughs)” The three cover sketches you sent were all so good I had a lot of trouble choosing just one.

I’m not very good at talking about my writing process, so I always want to run and hide when I have to write long postscripts.

I do have something to say about the “creamy scenes.” (laughs) While I was writing them, I got such intense cravings for the candy that I went out and bought them, despite my age. I confess! I hadn’t had the candy in ten years and it brought back so many good memories.

I remember when I was little having a real crisis

about whether or not the candy with the yellow wrappers had a different flavor from the candy with pink wrappers. I think they were the same—right? And I'm pretty sure there weren't the same number of pink and yellow wrappers in the bag. If there were the same number, I think all the conflicted little children would starve, but maybe I'm the only one who worried about it.

Thank you for sticking with me through this fluff.

Speaking of fluff, I don't know if this says something about me, but the uke characters I write are almost always idiots. I think I toned down Minami's stupidity this time, even if I do say so myself.

But maybe you think he's still an idiot after all. (laughs)

Some day I'm going to try writing an uke who actually gets to be amazingly cool.

I've almost reached my quota.

I've gotten incredibly behind on answering my mail lately, so I'd like to say something about that here. The letters you send me are a balm when I'm suffering. I take them out when I'm worn down and read them slowly, one by one, for wondrous hours. I am extremely lucky. The short, short version is: I'm sorry, I'm going on vacation. I would hate to just dash off a one-sentence reply and a list of my other stories.

It's a very selfish request, but if you could include a self-addressed stamped envelope in your letters, it

would help me out a lot. When I send a reply, my sloppy writing might make it get lost in the postal system. It's extra work for you, but I would really appreciate it!

I'm going to go now. Thank you to my manager, to Ms. Minase, to the readers—to everyone!

I hope we'll see each other again soon.

Hikaru Masaki

2004 – Summer's being very persistent this year...

"I like you, Minami. First it was your designs I liked, and now it's the way your body communicates with me. I want both of those things."

Designer Minami Kasuga's first project with his new employer Tomato Design is a big one—planning the interiors for a successful chain of hotels owned by the mysterious and attractive Shinya Asakura. Tomato Design's continued success rides on the rookie Minami satisfying his client, but just as Asakura's hotels aren't your average homes away from home—they're love hotels, where couples can enjoy themselves in luxurious privacy—Shinya Asakura is definitely not your ordinary entrepreneur. He's not just a fan of Minami's work, he's after Minami himself!

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